

“A Threadbare Prayer Mat”:
Sufi Poetry and the Textures of Everyday Life in Kurdistan

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the ways of living available to Kurdish Muslims who disown pietistic forms of religiosity even as they read and recite the Sufi poetry that is associated with devotional practice in Islam. Based on ethnographic and archival research in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, I trace the appearance of fragments of poetry within the context of ongoing relationships between Muslims of diverging religious orientation. Three ethnographic chapters take up conversations with Muslims who defer or dismiss invitations from their family to a committed practice of Islam. Analyzing the poetry that appears in these conversations and illuminating the context of ongoing relationships with kin and intimate friends, I describe the paradoxes by which Muslims express attractions and attachments to Islam even as they spurn committed practice. I argue that everyday life is a space that receives and transforms discourses of secularization and pietism while simultaneously sustaining different orientations that are often marked by ambivalence or skepticism. Each of these three chapters examines the ways of living and ethical orientations available to Muslims who are derelict in the performance of religious duties.

Chapter Four is a reading of epistolary letters of one of Kurdistan's most famous Sufi scholars: Mawlana Khalid Naqshbandi (d. 1827). With special attention to the appearance of poetic fragments, I examine the Arabic and Persian texts of letters that Mawlana Khalid sent to disciples, friends, teachers and political authorities. In light of the pains of physical separation and the threats besieging the integrity of the Muslim community, I suggest that the letters are part of an effort to sustain proper intimate relations between Muslims. I argue that insofar as poetry in the epistolary letters animates relationships under threat of separation, those letters may be part of a possible genealogy for contemporary Kurdish Muslims who sustain intimate relations with more

pious kin. Throughout the dissertation, I examine the texture of difference and abiding uncertainties that accompany ongoing relationships in everyday life in Kurdistan. Within that space, fragments of poetry continue to animate relationships that are marked by different orientations to Islam.

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I borrowed many an axe for this enterprise.

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Notes on Translation and Transliteration

This dissertation engages sources published in Sorani Kurdish, Persian, and Arabic, as well as extensive excerpts from interviews and ordinary speech in Sorani Kurdish. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

For Arabic and Persian sources, I use the system of transliteration given by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* with the exceptions that 'ayn is indicated by ', ghayn is indicated by *gh*, shîn is indicated by *sh*, and I have omitted diacritics on all consonants.

For Sorani Kurdish published sources, I use the system of transliteration from the Library of Congress, with the same exceptions as above.

For spoken Sorani Kurdish, my transliteration retains the distinctive features of the speaker insofar as is possible. For example, the initial consonant of the verb in the phrase “wa dekem” is commonly omitted; accordingly, I render it as “wa ekem” when appropriate.

For proper names with conventional spellings in English language scholarship, I retain this usage (e.g. Ibn Arabi, Mawlana Khalid Naqshbandi). In the absence of such convention for the names of many Kurdish scholars and cities, after an initial transliteration by the rules above, I omit diacritics (e.g. Mewlewî becomes Mewlewi). Exceptions to this are Suleimani, and Kak Ahmedi Sheikh, which adapt conventional English spellings to local usage and pronunciation.

Glossary

some recurring terms with their pronunciation and their general usage in this dissertation

‘ilm (ilem): knowledge, science, or (academic) discipline;

bawer (bawer): belief

cwanî (jwane): beauty

-*cwan* (jwan): adj., beautiful

dîn (deen): religion, for which Islam is paradigmatic

-*dînî* (deene): adj., religious

-*dîndar* (deendar): one who is religious, one who carries or bears religion

dîwan (deewan): a volume of collected poems

hadith (hadith): a saying of the Prophet Muhammad

himmat (himmat): spiritual aspiration or striving

hucre (hujreh): the inner-room of a mosque used for instruction, cf. *madrasa*;
metonymically, in Kurdistan this refers the entire system of educating ‘*ulama*’

husn (husin): beauty, syn. *jamaal*

-*ihsan* (ihsaan): virtuous character, moral excellence

kafir (kafir): an infidel

-*kufir* (kufir): n., infidelity

maktubat (maktubaat): a collection of epistolary letters

niyaz (niyaz): intention, purpose, also a proper name

pexshan (pakhshan): prose, also a proper name

serdar (sardar): leader, the one out front, also a proper name

shari‘et: (shariyat): correct Muslim practice as the ‘*ulama*’ have derived it from the
primary sources of Qur’an and hadith; also called “Islamic law”

terîqet (tareekat): a Sufi path, way, or order

‘*ulama*’ (oolamaah): religious scholars; plural form of the Arabic singular, ‘*alim*, while
in Kurdistan an individual scholar is known as a *mele*

xoshî (khoshee): pleasure, enjoyment

-*xosh* (khosh): adj. nice, pleasant, pleasing, enjoyable

INTRODUCTION

Poetic Fragments and the Textures of Everyday Life in Kurdistan

*Ayr dan hucrey dley pir derdim
Suchnan ktaw mecmu'ey ferdim*

*Flames engulfed the inner chamber of my sorrow-stricken heart
Burning up the books and all of my efforts*

With those words the Kurdish poet Mewlewî (Seyyid Abdulrahimi Tawegozi) concluded an eleven-couplet lament about the burning of his library sometime in the last two decades of his life, before his death in 1882.¹ Translated above as ‘inner chamber,’ the *hucre* is an interior room of a mosque often used for instruction. In Kurdistan-Iraq the term is used as a metonym for the broader system of education that transmits knowledge between scholars (elsewhere known as the *madrassa* or *hawza*). Within that system, scholars of the highest standing were known as *meley dwanze ‘ilm*—a ‘Mele of twelve sciences/disciplines.’ Poetry was an integral part of those disciplines, which also included Qur’an recitation (*tajwîd*), the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*), Arabic grammar (*nahu w serf*), rhetoric (*bulagha*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), logic (*mantiq*), theology (*kalaam*), mathematics (*riyazat*) and medicine (*tib*).² Mewlewi was one such scholar whose poetry and assorted treatises on these topics had already circulated beyond his ‘inner chamber’ in the form of manuscript copies and oral instruction. But this poem marks everything that emerges from his *hucre* as fragmentary, as merely part of a larger effort whose full scope, after the fire, can never be known. The continuous striving that

¹ Mudarris 1999: 211.

² Mahmudiyan (2003) reports that in Kurdistan a ‘Mela of twelve sciences’ did not carry any assumption about which sciences the scholar had studied. Mahmudiyan provides a list of sixty possible sciences (p. 194-5), from which I chose nine to indicate something of their breadth and depth.

he calls his ‘efforts’ (*ferd*) is accompanied by the sorrowful recognition that they may come to naught. The destruction of library also suggests the destruction of his heart’s continuous striving after knowledge of the divine. One might strive for a lifetime in pursuit of the divine only to discover in old age that arrival is illusory. A life of pietistic striving, in other words, always stands under the threat of a catastrophe where all is squandered. In the wake of the fire and in expectation of death, the poem not only mourns the loss of his library but also marks the rising (or returning) of uncertainty. Will these fragmented efforts suffice? Can one learn to continue living in uncertainty? Might poetry enable such living?

This dissertation examines the kinds of living enabled, expressed or described by fragments of classical Kurdish poetry that appear in daily life in contemporary Kurdistan. My aim is not to recover a library that is lost but to explore the kinds of living and the kinds of uncertainty to which fragments of poetry have become attached in the first decade of the twenty-first century. To examine the processes and occasions through which that attachment takes place, three of the following chapters draw on extensive ethnographic fieldwork based in the cities of Suleimani and Hewler in the Kurdistan region of Iraq in 2008 and 2009; a fourth chapter analyses the text of some epistolary correspondence from a more distant past that I claim resonates with the present. My goal is to trace the appearance of fragments of poetry, such as that of Mewlewi, in the daily lives of Kurdish Muslims in contemporary Kurdistan, rendering the texture of that appearance as a stitch in ongoing relations to others and to Islam. The remainder of this introduction prepares the ground for the arguments of the following chapters in four

ways. First, I describe the recent history of the life of poetry in Kurdistan by tracing some fragments of Mewlewi's poetry from the early nineteenth century to the present. I then review some key concepts and methods developed through other anthropological studies of Islam and poetry. In relation to these, I argue that the texture of everyday life has been underappreciated and deserves the sustained inquiry I seek to provide in this dissertation. Finally, I describe the procedures of research and writing from which this dissertation grows before giving an overview of the chapters.

Fragments of Mewlewi's Poetry

I begin by sketching four scenes from the past 200 years that show different ways Mewlewi's poetry has been attached to daily life in Kurdistan. What I call a scene is sometimes an entire epoch, sometimes a series of loosely connected events and sometimes a discrete occasion whose duration could be measured in minutes. I do not claim for them status as representative of a history or a chronology since I present them in a way that demonstrates both gaps and overlaps. But I do claim that these scenes illuminate some of the most important contexts within which fragments of poetry animated ways of living in recent history. They are cumulative in the sense that the force and authority of poetic fragments at each scene assumes and transforms the preceding one. Each one, then, is also essential context for the chapters to follow.

First (early 1800's—1958): There was a symbiotic relation of poetry, knowledge and living in the *hucres* of early nineteenth century Kurdistan that wove together discursive forms with embodied practices. The link between poetry and knowledge is evident in

Mewlewi's several treatises on '*aqîde*—doctrine or creed—in Arabic, Persian and Kurdish. Each is written in strict rhyme and meter, and contemporary Kurdish *ulama* report that his Arabic treatise *Al-fazilah* was later taught at Al-Azhar in Cairo—the premiere institution of higher learning in the Islamic scholarship. The treatise written in Kurdish is devoted to 'Ashari doctrine and called '*Eqîdey Merzîye*, or 'the accepted creed' since upon its completion Mewlewi's teacher and sheikh encountered the Prophet Muhammad in a dream where the Prophet announced his approval of the creed. Stretching to more than 2,000 couplets, this treatise employs the distinctive rhyme and meter schemes of the Hawrami dialect of Kurdish.³ Through this treatise, knowledge of the divine and knowledge of correct living were rendered and transmitted in poetry.

Poetry and knowledge were linked to living through a set of embodied practices. Paramount among these was a disciplined form of conduct toward one's teacher that included such instructions as: never turn one's back on him, do not sit while he stands, address him with proper terms of respect and in moderated volume (Mahmudiyan 1382: 58ff, Qaradaghi 1998: 18ff). While not always an explicitly prescribed dimension of study, two other practices suffused the social life of *hucra* education. First, poets, students, and other devotees often gathered at mosques and other locations for the ritual recitation of poetry that sometimes included dance (Hejar 2009). Poetry was here inseparable from the material impact of its rhythmic performance, bringing body, mind

³ Dmitry Frolov's masterful study (2000) describes the emergence of rhyme and meter schemes in pre-Islamic Arabia and Farahidi's consolidation of those schemes into the strict science of '*aruz* in the eighth century. Many Persian schemes are practically identical (Thiesen 1982), but with the slightest variations that lead Herdî (2009) to claim that the adaptation of rhyme and meter schemes in Kurdish was patterned on Persian rather than Arabic. Each of these schemes, regardless of language, are referred to as '*aruz*, while the distinctive scheme associated with Hawrami dialect of Kurdish is called *pence*. A primary difference is that the length of a foot (glossed as 'long' or 'short') is a constitutive feature of '*aruz* but irrelevant to *pence*. I return to the history and politics of these formal differences below.

and soul under the authority of the Prophet through the mediation of the *sheikh*.

Secondly, from occasions of recitation poems were committed to memory or manuscript and *vice versa*. Some hand copied manuscripts were devoted entirely to Mewlewi's poetry while others were collections of poems and fragments of poems from various authors including the great Persian poets Hafiz, Rumi and Khayyam, and Arabic poetry by Shawqi, Ibn Fard and others (Qaradaghi 2008). Often painstakingly copied in calligraphic script and beautifully decorated, these material objects were testament to the intimacy of truth and beauty (*ibid.*).

Such truth and beauty was linked to the moral education of Muslims. Whether they only acquired the basics of literacy through study of the Qur'an or progressed toward the status of a Mele of twelve sciences, instruction provided a framework for the development of Muslim virtues. Instruction usually took the form of a small group or a single student with their instructor, in which the passions and needs of the student determined the texts to be studied at an individualized pace within a broad schema of progressive difficulty. Throughout academic study, disciplinary forms of conduct instilled humility as a bodily disposition. The acquisition of knowledge itself upheld the virtue of sustaining the exemplary model of the Prophet Muhammad; reciprocally, virtuous conduct was also evidence of knowledge. *Knowledge* ('ilm) here pertained not only to the external sciences of disciplinary study, but the 'internal sciences' of experience that made up the disciplinary practices of the Sufi paths such as the Naqshbandi.⁴ Sufi practice in Kurdistan in the nineteenth century and early twentieth

⁴ Alongside the Naqshbandi, the Qadri have been a prominent presence in Kurdistan. Contrary to popular theories that select formative but discrete events as proof of an ancient rivalry between the two, the biographies of Kurdistan's scholars and saints show that for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, belonging within a Sufi lineage was not an exclusive form of identity and

century bore almost no resemblance to the models that purport to divide religious authority in Muslim societies between scholarship and sainthood or between the externals of divine law and the interiority of experience.⁵ *Tesewwuf*, or ‘Sufi-becoming,’ was not considered autonomous from Islam, nor a departure from being Muslim in any sense of the word. On the contrary, the ‘*ulama* of nineteenth century Kurdistan generally insisted on the essential identity of the three domains of experience and practice for Muslims: *shari‘a*, or the ‘divine law’ as the commands of God for proper human living, the *tariqa* or (Sufi) ‘path’ which provides moral disciplines to acquire Muslim virtues, and *haqiqa* as the (divine) reality to which virtuous Muslim living continually bears witness. Although accusations could be heard in this era that the practices associated with Sufi poetry were heretical or illicit innovations,⁶ such accusations rarely gained any strength within the ‘*ulama*, nor did they amount to organized enmity against *tesewwuf* as such. Rather, these practices were understood as part of Muslim traditions that make manifest the reality of God’s sovereignty *through* adherence to the divine law. This first scene shows how poetic fragments animated a kind of living that aimed to uphold knowledge and virtues that are connected through the lineage of scholars to the example of the Prophet.

Second (early 1900’s): In the early decades of the twentieth century, Kurdish nationalist thought began to grow strong in the class of intellectuals who were trained both in the *hucra* system and in Ottoman military schools. Alongside the political aspiration to the

many scholars acquired affiliation through both lineages (Qaradaghi 1998). The Naqshbandi is more commonly associated with the intellectual revival that was responsible for the production of poetry in Kurdish language starting in the nineteenth century, and poets writing in that period usually emphasized the Naqshbandi lineage. For these reasons, I devote most attention to the Naqshbandi in this dissertation.

⁵ See, for example, Woodward 1989.

⁶ I discuss some of these accusations in Chapter Four.

autonomous state form, an effort intensified to separate Kurdish ‘culture’ from Turkish, Persian and Arab cultures. These intellectuals were often themselves poets dissatisfied by the formal resemblance of most Kurdish poetry to the rhyme and meter schemes adopted from Arabic and Persian verse. Figures such as Hajî Tawfiq Pîremerd sought to lay claim to a distinctly Kurdish poetic heritage. In this effort, he turned to the work of Mewlewi and praised its distinctive rhyme and meter schemes as truly Kurdish poetic genius. Pîremerd published translations of Mewlewi’s poetry in the Sorani dialect in various periodicals in Istanbul and Slêmani, and then as a single volume in 1935 (Mistefa 2000: 8). Pîremerd’s own poetry bled into Mewlewi’s as he borrowed couplets and half-lines from the later’s work; Pîramerd sometimes named his works as translations of Mewlewi and sometimes he did not.⁷ While the pietistic aspirations of poetry in Mewlewi’s era were carried forward, they began to share space with the demand for a freedom that could only be realized in the form of an independent state. Demands for autonomy and independence grew more intense following the creation of Iraq under a British-installed monarchy (Ahmad 1994). In this era, poetic fragments took on a new political valence. Mewlewi’s poetry became part of a national heritage that demanded recognition as such.

Third (1958, 1961, 2002, 2009): In the tumultuous years following his 1958 coup and the abolition of the monarchy, Abd al-Qasim set about consolidating the sovereignty of the Iraqi state (Rubin 2007). The terms of the debate with Kurdish political interests proceeded in terms of the recognition of rights and liberties for Kurds as a nation and as bearers of a distinct culture and language. Concerning the kinds of living to which

⁷ Ironically, one outcome of this is that many in contemporary Suleimani know Mewlewi’s work in Sorani and forget that it is actually Pîramerd’s translation and not the original Hewramî poem.

Mewlewi's poetry could be attached in this scene, two developments are most important. First, Abd al-Qasim sought to bring the authority of the *'ulama* within the orbit of the state. In this task, a single exam was administered to all qualified students of the *hucra* and those who succeeded were given the honor of studying at the new state-run institutions of religious learning. Classrooms were instituted with universal curricula in which poetry (specifically, the study of *'aruz* [rhyme and meter] within the broader discipline of *bulagha* [rhetoric]) was still present. But the poetic practices that had been sustained by the social life of the *hucra* were neglected.

Second, at the same time, the effort to accommodate Kurdish difference with the similarity demanded of Iraqi citizens facilitated a new mode of attaching Kurdish poetry to daily life. In 1961 the Ministry of Culture sponsored the publication of a volume of Mewlewi's poetry compiled and edited by Mele Abdulkarim Mudarris.⁸ It was the first 'modern' edition of Mewlewi's poetry that was produced and sold on a large scale to consumers. Mudarris, along with his son and co-editor Fetah Abdulkarim, consulted multiple manuscripts and wrote an extensive running commentary in the footnotes that presumed a reader unversed in the general scheme of symbols and allusions common to Kurdish (Sufi) poetry. The publication of this edition made fragments of Mewlewi's poetry available to anyone stepping into a bookstore with the time and patience to read the work silently and privately—quite removed from the social milieu of the *hucra* in

⁸ Born in the Hawreman region of Kurdish, trained in the *hucra* and associated with the Naqshbandî path, Mele Abdulkarim Mudarris (1898—2005) is one of the most important figures in twentieth century Kurdish poetry. In addition to the *dîwan* of Mewlewi he published *dîwans* of other prominent poets, translated the work of nineteenth century Kurdish Sufis, and wrote several treatises and commentaries on the Qur'an, theology, Arabic grammar and other topics in Kurdish and Arabic. He lived much of his life in Baghdad attached to the mosque of Abd al-Qadr Geylanî and was appointed senior Muftî of Iraq by the Ministry of Religious Endowments.

which the poetry had been produced. Although several other editions have appeared, Mudaris' edition continues to be the most commonly read in Kurdistan today.⁹

Although a handful of scholars valued individual education in the old style enough to preserve it in piecemeal practice, it was clear that the *hucre* as such was in ashes: poetry had been separated from the domain of knowledge, and its relation to the disciplinary practices of Muslim virtues was also displaced. This became strikingly clear to me in 2009 when I visited a mosque in Suleimani where the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Education was responsible for the instruction of students for future employment in the mosques of Kurdistan. As I spoke to the headmaster, himself a *Mela*, he told me how the curriculum had been redesigned to include science, computers and English. When I asked about the place of poetry—either within the study of rhetoric or beyond the curriculum, he told me that it was not studied at all. Skeptical that poetry could have been entirely purged from the curricula and the social life of religious education, I asked twice whether poetry did not appear at all in the study of other disciplines—for example in grammar, or in time in between lessons. The headmaster seemed exasperated by my queries and he declared decisively, as if to shake me from an illusion: *shi'ir 'ilm niye*, “poetry is not knowledge.”

⁹ The fourth re-printing of this *dîwan* in 2006 was 5,000 copies. The fragmentary nature of this edition is apparent throughout the work. In his introduction Mudaris spent an entire page explaining the incomplete nature of this edition and inviting readers with manuscripts to submit alternate versions of poems, longer versions of poems or challenges to interpretations given by the editors in footnotes. He called on readers' love of Kurdish literature to inspire them in helping to “pass on the heritage (*mîrat*) of our literature in a more true and correct fashion to generations after us” (9). Rather than assuming the completion of the project, he was oriented toward the process of its ongoing perfection, a process bracketed only by death: “if the length of my days allows it, I will print it in a better fashion” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, as if to highlight the fragmentary nature of the book itself as a material object, in the commentary about the poem cited above in which Mewlewi described the burning of his library, Mele Abdulkarim Mudarris notes the following:

“A strange event: we had not yet finished the draft prior to this [published] draft when the Najah Printing House, containing the *diwan*, caught fire and several pages and drafts of this book were burnt.” (1999:211)

When I reported this conversation to others in Kurdistan, I found one reaction quite common: a sense of disgust and annoyance at the influence of Islamists. In popular imagination in Kurdistan, an ‘Islamist’ (*Islamîy*) is not usually associated with the institutional tradition of the ‘*ulama*. The term can refer to any one or a combination of several distinct religious and political movements, all of very recent origin. (These include the *Bzutinewey Islamî*, or Islamic Movement of Kurdistan, that cropped up in the early 1980’s [Leezenburg 2001] ; the various groups that have grown out of that movement and competed in elections as political parties since 2004; some Salafi groups that are not politically engaged; groups from the south of Iraq of either Sunni or Shi’a affiliation; the Iranian government, and others.) One thread of Islamist discourse was particularly virulent toward the practices associated with Sufi paths. While visiting the tombs of scholars and saints had been a common practice throughout Kurdistan, some Islamists deemed it a heretical innovation. In July 2002, affiliates of the militant group *Jund al-Islam* destroyed the tombs of some Naqshbandi scholars who belonged in the same lineage as Mewlewi. The desecration of these tombs and the larger discourse that authorized it was commonly reviled by most ‘*ulama* and Muslims in Kurdistan. But that discourse also drew some into its orbit. Ironically, this sometimes took place through informal instruction carried out within the mosque. The Kurdistan Regional Government responded by closing mosques to instruction and even keeping locks on the gates of the mosque at all times except designated prayer times. This response was commonly reviled by many ‘*ulama* in Kurdistan, while others considered it a matter of necessity.¹⁰

¹⁰ The political parties that made up the Kurdistan Regional Government fought *Jund al-Islam*’s militia for several years until American-led forces brought the arms and technology to end the standoff in 2003. That was perhaps the prominent eruption of military violence within the Kurdistan region involving the American forces—although their pursuit of *Jund al-Islam* (also known as *Ansar*

Fourth (Summer, 2009): While conducting fieldwork intermittently between 2004 and 2009, I encountered fragments of Mewlewi's poetry in school textbooks, in popular songs, and on a Facebook page devoted to him. During the summer of 2009 I began visiting a teahouse frequented by men who had begun their education in the *hucra* system in the 1940's and then been transferred to the state-administered religious education system inaugurated by Abd al-Qasim. Several said with an attitude that echoed the view of the headmaster mentioned above: *Shi'ir nemawe*, "Poetry is no more," or *shi'ir baw niye*, "poetry has no currency/popularity." This attitude toward the *present* of poetry was largely an indictment of the prose poetry composed since the 1970's when many poets began to give up the measured meter of poetry. But most of these men were well versed in the classical tradition and had hundreds of couplets and poetic fragments committed to memory. It was a common mode of interaction in that teahouse to bring a line of poetry in Kurdish or Arabic or a verse from the Qur'an and ask others to explain what was opaque in the former or seemingly a grammatical error in the latter. This sometimes resembled a riddle designed to stump others and sometimes it was a question that emerged from the questioner's own confusion. I was enraptured by this practice and I spent many mornings waiting for such conversations. One of the men took a special

al-Islam) and affiliated groups was the reason given for ongoing raids and arrests. With American support, the consolidation of the Kurdistan Regional Government's authority in Kurdistan-Iraq then proceeded with the expansion of security operations, the creation of a free-market that attracted foreign investment, and a broad discourse of liberal democracy and liberation. That discourse was widely echoed in Kurdistan in the initial years of the US occupation, but by 2007 many were quick to say that while corruption used to be the work of dictators in Iraq, it was now the work of democrats, too. Anti-terror laws were routinely evoked in the arrest and persecution of independent journalists. Public services lagged, as oil, water and electricity were in short supply. Teashops, taxis, kitchens and newspapers were often hosting debates on the question: Are we better off now than we were with Saddam? Those who answered in the negative were more often lodging a critique of the Kurdistan Regional Government's corruption than denouncing the American occupation.

interest in my research and often quizzed me about poetry in side-conversations. He would recite a line or two then ask me to identify the author and give the meaning of a particular poem. I didn't always pass the test but I was honored that he deemed me worthy of taking it. One morning, as I sat next to this teacher, another man sat down next to me and told me that he wanted to recite a poem for me. He visited the teashop less regularly, he was much younger than the other men, and rather than a *hucra* education he had a degree in medicine. I was surprised to hear him joining in their game in this way and singling me out as his audience. The Doctor recited a fragment of a poem from Mewlewi that I later discovered in Mudarris' *dîwan* (1387: 369) in the following form:

*yekê ce dosan bew zam[î] nowe
 ser niyan we xak asaney towe
 mîhman gherîw keremseray ton
 muhtac we rêzey sefrey rijay ton
 drêghî meker aman sed aman
 meferma mîhman bê tosh aman
 ya xelîl dexîl kê 'adet kerdên
 toshe we dergay kerîmyan berden*

*With new grief a friend
 pays a visit to the earth [around] you.
 As a stranger a guest comes to your honored presence
 in need of morsels from the table of your supplication.
 Don't dally, please, oh please!
 Don't ask how a guest comes without [his own] provisions.
 Oh, Khalil!, since when was it a custom
 to provide for oneself at the gates of the generous?*

When I asked if that was the whole poem, he said that it was only a part and shook his head to show that he had not memorized the rest. I told him I could not follow the Hawrami dialect recited aloud so he gave a terse explanation: "Should a poor and simple man take something to eat with him when he goes to the home of a great man? No, that's not fair..." It was immediately clear that there was no more commentary forthcoming,

and I sensed that his recitation did not quite belong to the genre of intellectual riddle common to the teashop. Wondering if the poem bore some pathos unique to his life, I asked how long he had been enjoying Mewlewi's poetry. He replied that he had first started to read it while in medical school, in the evenings and every morning. Bearing in mind the general skepticism at the teashop about poetry's capacity to *mean* something in the present I asked, "Does it still mean something to you?" He exclaimed passionately, "It's philosophy!" and went on to say that he understood the poem as both critique and repentance (*rexne w tewbe*). The remainder of the conversation was stilted and I learned little more. The man was a rare visitor to the teahouse and that year I didn't have the opportunity to speak with him further about it.

A Study of Poetry & Islam in Kurdistan

My rendering of these four scenes already bear traces of the concepts and methods developed in recent decades of research on the anthropology of poetry and of Islam. In the first scene I made gestures toward the definitive studies of both Steve Caton and Talal Asad. Based on fieldwork carried out in the early 1980's, Caton (1990) argued that poetry among Yemeni tribesmen was a "practice" through which tribal ideology was forged and learned. In Caton's study poetic genres were produced through distinctive ritual occasions where men strove to exemplify the tribal virtues of piety, self-control and autonomy. One can see how the life of poetry in the *hucre* may be approached as a series of practices through which Muslim virtues were developed: through instruction in poetry one acquired knowledge and humility. As the work of Talal Asad (1986, 1993) has suggested, these practices may be approached as part of a "discursive tradition" of

argumentation oriented toward the definitive texts of Qur'an and *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). Such a discursive tradition orients Muslims toward virtues that are realized through techniques of the body and disciplinary procedures within particular institutional structures of power (Asad 1983). Mewlewi's poetic texts were deeply rooted in this tradition: the treatises were efforts to discern and render the truths of the two sources of divine truth as models for daily living. The practice of poetry in this milieu could be approached through the study of particular virtues that are given by the Prophet, sustained through the genealogical lineage of scholars and achieved by Muslims through particular techniques that have their own temporality and materiality. Instruction, collective recitation and manuscript copying were a part of those practices, authorized by the *'ulama* within the institutional framework of the *hucra*. So the concepts of Islam as a discursive tradition, and poetry as a practice offer great insight in understanding the ways of living at stake in the first scene.

The second scene echoes concerns that inform much of the research brought together as Kurdish Studies as well as recent work in comparative literature. National and linguistic identity has been the axis of a struggle for rights and freedoms for Kurds in Iraq and neighboring countries since before the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and the creation of modern states in the region. Iraq was built on an Arab national identity and refused to recognize the Kurdish language (Hassanpour 1992). Scholars have analyzed policies of 'linguicide' (Hassanpour *et. al.* 2012) and the accompanying procedures through which writers and intellectuals have grounded the legitimacy of political claims in a distinctive cultural heritage (Ahmadzadeh 2012). What this research makes clear is that the embeddedness of poetry in the lives of Kurdish Muslims is

inseparable from the state in two ways: states have consistently denied its legitimacy in various ways, and the production of a national literature is joined to aspirations to the autonomous state form. The ascendance of Kurdish poetry within Mewlewi's life and its subsequent mobilization by nationalists in the early twentieth century are inseparable from the notion of "a single world as a space populated by distinct civilizational complexes, each in possession of its own tradition, the unique expression of its own forms of national 'genius'" (Mufti 2010: 263-4). The establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government allowed for some normalization of Kurdish language within everyday life but the sense of marginalization by the Iraqi state and even at the global level persists. Speaking Kurdish even in contemporary Iraq is always accompanied by awareness that powerful states have wished—and many still do—that no one spoke Kurdish at all. Thus, claims to a Kurdish national heritage in poetry such as the one that Piremerd lodged for Mewlewi, have been only fleetingly and partially acknowledged on the global stage. Therefore, the second scene underlines the advantage of approaching the life of poetry in Kurdistan as inseparable from the emergence of *nationalist discourse*.

Common to the series of events I collected as a third scene are the effects of a secularizing state that have been treated by anthropologists and others concerned with Muslim societies. Here three themes stand out that relate to authoritative institutions, practices of reading, and embodied sensibilities: First, the institutional authority of the *'ulama* in the *hucra* system was brought within the orbit of the state in an unprecedented way. While the task of 'reforming' the education deemed 'religious' has taken different trajectories in different states (Hefner 2007, Zaman 1999), in each case the task has had to provide an answer to the question of how the state maintains sovereignty. If in the

Iranian case after the revolution, state sovereignty required the flourishing independence of the *hawza* (Zaman 2010), the Iraqi case in 1958 was quite the opposite. The *hucra* in Kurdistan was all but demolished by the Iraqi state—what Wael Hallaq (2012: 168) might characterize as the ‘vanishing’ of the institutions that supported the *shari‘a*. The practices of poetry that had been at the center of the *hucra* were separated from the moral and intellectual training of Muslims and reassigned to the domain of ‘culture,’ or *thaqaafa*—the name of the government ministry that printed Mewlewi’s *dīwan*.

Second, reading poetry became intertwined with the market through the sale of books (such as Mewlewi’s *dīwan*) for private consumption. If in some sense this has broadened access to knowledge (Eickelman & Anderson 1999), it was also connected to new configurations of ethical practice in which poetry was separated from the social life of the *hucra*. Khaled Furani (2012) described one such configuration as the movement of Palestinian poetry in the twentieth century from a collective, audible, political revolution into a private revolution in the interiority of a silent self (2012). In this case, the privacy of reading books purchased in the market corresponds to a secular notion of morality as a private domain.

A third theme in this scene resonates with discussions in anthropology concerning the distinctive *sensibilities* associated with processes of secularization. Not only the rearrangement of concepts and institutions, this process is correlated to distinctive, embodied attitudes or postures toward what counts as “Islam,” “politics,” and “morality” (Asad 2003). By simultaneously absorbing Islamic authority within its own institutions and policing the mosque as a site of political insurrection, both the Iraqi state and the Kurdistan Regional Government fostered anxiety and suspicion around claims to

authoritatively Islamic discourse. Here I draw from Hussein Agrama's (2012) suggestion that the sovereignty of the secular state in Egypt has been established and extended through the cultivation of suspicion and anxiety about the mingling of religion and politics. In the case of Kurdistan, we can see that a regard for (Sufi) poetry as veering from the path of Islam is inseparable from the political dimension of claims of Islamists about what exactly the path of Islam is. That is to say, the secularizing state and its shadow movements that seek to "Islamicize" the state have together produced some of the conditions in which Sufi poetry may appear as "culture" rather than "knowledge," or "ethics."¹¹ This is manifest in part as the sense of disgust and exasperation that so many expressed when I reported the headmaster's dismissive attitude toward poetry. Thus in Kurdistan, we can see that the process of secularization has rendered commonsensical an embodied sensibility that regards all poetry as a cultural production that can be separated from or opposed to Islamic traditions.

To conclude, I suggest that each of the first three scenes I described in the trajectory of fragments of Mewlewi's poetry affirms many of the most important claims advanced by scholars in anthropology, Islamic studies and Kurdish studies. These are the method for the study of Islam that takes as a starting point the Qur'an and *hadith* as a discursive tradition and requires embodied techniques for achieving particular virtues; the

¹¹ Here we should also consider the intellectual genealogy of the Orientalist enterprise and its influence on political contention in contemporary Kurdistan. To take an example directly related to Mewlewi's poetry: Enwer Qadir Mihemed's *Lîrîkay sha'îrî Gewrey Kurd Mewlewi* [Lyrics of the Great Kurdish Poet Mewlewi] is widely considered some of the best scholarly research on Mewlewi's poetry. Based on a PhD dissertation completed in the Soviet Union, Mihemed claims that the popular Sufi notion of the 'unity of being' (Ar. *wahdah al wujud*) is reflected in Mewlewi's work. Though he only gives a brief glance at three poems of Mewlewi's, his discussion of the notion of the unity of being is rooted in three works: one by British Orientalist R. A. Nicholson, a second by a Soviet Orientalist named E.S. Braginsky, and a third by modern Arab intellectual Abdulrahman Badawi. Mihemed describes the notion of the unity of being as something that "strict [literally: 'dry'] Muslims consider a deviation from shari'a and Islamic religion" (2007: 242). (I elaborate on the notion of 'dryness' in Chapter Two.)

concept of poetry as a practice that makes those virtues available; the notion of secularization by which modern states assume the right to authorize or deny both the institutional authority of Islamic traditions and the claims of minority populations to a national heritage; and the notion of a secular sensibility that regards poetry as separate from the knowledge and ethics of Islam. This affirms both the mobility of the concepts and methods developed within this field of study and the fact, while historically distinctive, Kurdistan should not to be regarded as a space of exception in regard to the historical processes that have affected other Muslim societies in the region.

However, my encounter with the man in the teashop poses a unique challenge. It bears all the evidence of poetry's recent history in Kurdistan and provides an opportunity for a new perspective on the life of poetry in Muslim societies. I begin by acknowledging that the recitation of this Kurdish poem to an American researcher in 2009 has a distinct political valence. Many Kurds explicitly stated that their participation in my research was partly motivated by their sense of satisfaction in knowing that I would give Kurdish poetry much deserved attention. It was attention that the Iraqi government had only begrudgingly allowed, and attention whose location in an American university was regarded as a more prestigious place on the global stage than the humble teashop where I sat that day. The Doctor's passions had surely been formed in an environment saturated with nationalist discourse. However, the plethora of studies devoted to Kurdish nationalism (Entessar 1992, Vali 2003, Houston 2008) has had the unintended effect of making "the Kurdish question" seem like the only question worth asking in Kurdistan. The Doctor's recitation, though, was followed by the exclamation that the poem was "philosophy!". So while the nationalist discourse to which Piremerd

contributed in his promotion of Mewlewi's poetry here provides an important context that helped to make the poem available to the Doctor, the Doctor's exclamation requires us to ask how the poem addressed the task of living so poignantly as to be called philosophy.

This moral force of poetry as philosophy is also an invitation to expand on existing studies of processes of secularization. The Doctor's encounter with poetry occurred in a space produced by a secularizing state that had co-opted religious authority in part by publishing and distributing poetry as a "cultural" product. Far removed from the social practices of the *hucra* that had nourished Mewlewi's poetry, the Doctor's reading of Mewlewi was in some sense "private." However, even if my encounters with the Doctor were fleeting, they assumed and created a social relationship. It was not only as a citizen in Kurdistan or of the world that he pleaded the case of Mewlewi's poetry as philosophy and asked acknowledgement from me for that case. He spoke to me as to one in a shared world of moral beings who each confront injustices and strive to give accounts of themselves as such. Sharing that world was a condition under which I could appreciate the poem. While profoundly affected by the notion of morality as a private domain set apart from poetry, our encounter is not reducible to it. So I take his plea that I acknowledge the moral force of poetry as provocation to think about the ways in which the moral force of poetry continues to animate intimate relations in the midst of secularization.

The notions of discourse and practice help to illuminate some of the moral force of what the Doctor called the poem's philosophy. His elaboration of the poem's philosophy as "repentance" (*tewbe*) connects it to a posture that is central to much Islamic discourse and practice: that one turn from wrong actions and rely on God's

provisions. It is this turning that Mewlewi demonstrates when he describes his arrival at the gate of the saint's tomb, acknowledging he has done wrong and asking for the intervention of the saint's supplications. But calling it "critique" suggests a different posture that has a paradoxical relation to repentance: If one arrives at the gate of one who can provide, then why bring one's own provisions? To extend the metaphor: if God is so forgiving, then why must one offer one's good deeds and proper conduct to find divine favor? Heard in this way, his posture toward Islam may involve a turning away from prescribed conduct. By suggesting the prospect of this reading, the Doctor is certainly participating in the discursive tradition by questioning its relation to prescribed practice. But beyond acknowledging *that* he participates, his exclamations invite us to attend to the texture of *how* he participates and the distinctive paradoxes of that participation. While a number of studies have elucidated the processes through which contemporary Muslims take up pietistic aspirations as a mode of participation in Islamic traditions (Deeb 2001, Hirschkind 2005, Mahmood 2004) these have generally been much less interested to account for other, more paradoxical relations to Islam. So the Doctor's recitation invites us to attend to the paradoxical relations to Islam that may accompany the appearance of poetry in the course of everyday conversations.

This last problem becomes all the more interesting when we also consider that diverse ways of relating to Islam are often sustained within intimate relations in Muslim families. Those relations are much more deeply intertwined in the material and temporal dimensions of sharing an everyday life together than was my encounter with the Doctor. So here the question becomes how different relations to Islamic traditions are sustained within intimate relations.

The provocations from the fourth scene provide three questions that are the very heart from which this dissertation grows. What is the moral force of poetry in daily life? What is the range of different relations to Islamic traditions available to Kurdish Muslims? How might the moral force of poetry come to animate relations between Muslims differently oriented to those traditions? These questions carry forward scholarly work on the notions of Islam as a discursive tradition, poetry as a practice, and processes of secularization (including the growth of nationalism). But they promise a new perspective on the life of poetry in a Muslim society by calling for a focus on the contexts in which poetry appears in everyday life. In doing so, they invite attention to the kinds of difference and paradox that accompany the absorption of these larger processes within the texture of everyday life.

What is “the texture of everyday life”? By the everyday I do not mean a private space where the larger discourses do their work as a script might be performed on a stage. (This is the notion of the everyday that informs Esra Ozyurek’s [2006] study of state secularism in Turkey.) Neither do I refer to a pre-political space of democratic creativity from which social movements might grow. (This is the notion of the ordinary that inspires Asef Bayat’s [2010] inquiry in what he calls social “nonmovements.”) Rather, I take up Veena Das’s (1996, 2007) work on the everyday as a space whose force lies in its capacity to *remake* through *reception*. Das describes how the violence of events such as the Partition and the discourses that emerge from the state in their wake were received and transformed in everyday life. It is within the temporality of the everyday that intimates are able to find or (lose) a future together, in ways that may not match the expectations generated by larger discourses. Central to this notion of the everyday, then,

is its capacity to *differ* from the more stable or coherent notions of discourse and practice by inhabiting the fissures within them. Thus the everyday is a space that accommodates paradox. Here I draw from Naveeda Khan's (2008) account of how, over a period of time, a single family in Pakistan gave voice to some very different religious orientations that otherwise threatened to fracture the political landscape of the country. Khan shows that "the ways in which malevolence and generosity rub up against one another within a family suggest how religious differences get worked into the weave of domesticity" (234-5). What might appear contradictory at the level of sectarian conflict becomes a paradox that animates intimate relations. As I employ it in this dissertation, then, the notion of the everyday is distinct from the concepts of discourse, practice and secularization in part because it is a space that sustains different orientations to the forces described by those concepts¹². This capacity to sustain difference emerges from the material, embodied task of living together, and the temporality of ongoing relations that suffer injury and fear separation even as they find opportunities to savor the simple pleasures of life.

In attending to the place of poetry in everyday life, I take as a point of departure Lila Abu-Lughod's study (1999) of poetry among Bedouin women in 1970's Egypt. On the one hand, Abu-Lughod describes a coherent *practice* of poetry with clearly defined Muslim virtues and tribal values realized through that practice. She concludes that the erotic sentiments expressed by women in poetic couplets they share with one another are not transgressions of tribal values of honor, but exemplifications of self-control insofar as those sentiments are expressed within the culturally authorized genre of the poetic couplet. But on the other hand—and more interesting for my purposes—she is attentive

¹² This is not to say that those concepts are not themselves concerned with difference. On the contrary, see Warner, et. al., 2010, Foucault 1972:149-56, and Caton 1990:180-215. I clarify the stakes of this difference in the everyday below, p. 34.

to the seemingly spontaneous appearance of poetry in the course of common interactions. Abu-Lughod insists that the full ‘meaning’ of any such appearance only emerges in view of the relationships that make up those interactions. It is the spontaneous nature of the recitation offered by the man in the teashop that is a central concern of this dissertation. And while my interaction with him was too fleeting to offer a robust account of the relationship in which poetry gains its moral force, the forthcoming chapters take up that work of *tracing* the force of poetry across relationships that shift over time.

Rendering *texture* in this way, I take a cue from the aims of Kathleen Stewart (2007), who wants her writing to “say something about ordinary affects by performing some of the intensity and texture that makes them habitable and animate” (4).

Throughout the dissertation I use the term ‘animate’ to refer to the work of poetry since I do not take poetry as inert matter, but as a force that gives life to relations. By providing close accounts of those relations, I hope to render poetry’s animating force in ethnographic prose. And because the relations themselves are characterized by uncertainty and difference, the texture that interests me is not smooth and singular but rough and plural. It is paradoxical, showing the work of time in the way that it differs from itself. The following section specifies the kind of “difference” at stake in this dissertation.

“A Threadbare Prayer Mat”

To gesture toward the uneven texture of everyday life that I seek to render in these chapters, I borrowed the phrase “a threadbare prayer mat.” This phrase comes from a quatrain by the twentieth century Kurdish poet (and linguist) Hejar Mukriyani. Though I

have been unable to find a similar poem in contemporary collections of Khayyam, Hejar published it in his collection of translations of the famous Persian poet Omer Khayyam (Hejar 1990:64):

*mey têke! heraye! pê m delên bêdîne
chon rengî berm? perom le heshda shîne
bermale gunahposhekeshm wa shir bu
hel nagîrê teqel be barê bikeyn pîna*

Poor some booze! Nevermind the rest! They call me irreligious.
How [else] could I color it? My cloth is [already] cast in a sad, blue dye!
My fault-concealing prayer mat is so threadbare
It won't take any patching, as if it could be fixed once and for all.

The image of a threadbare prayer mat here emerges as the expression of a spiritual condition: a man stands before God without pretense of having done everything that God requires of him, acknowledging he has done some things that God forbade him; he is spurned by his fellow Muslims and the cloth of his reputation is immersed in blue—a color of mourning and sadness. One way to read the poem is to take it as an indication of a man's pious dependence on divine generosity and forgiveness that is similar to the notion of repentance that the Doctor mentioned above. In this reading, the poem does not authorize the neglect of one's prayers. It serves as a reminder that the perfection of their fulfillment is beyond the reach of an ordinary Muslim. In calling for booze, he calls for the reprobation that in many Muslim societies accrues to those who drink alcohol. Suffering this reprobation at least serves to instill humility in a wayward Muslim. On this reading the poem serves to remind one that divine beneficence is greater than human failing, or in other words, to borrow the idiom of a famous saying of the Prophet Muhammad, God's mercy precedes his wrath (Graham 1977:184).

But there is another way to read the poem that resonates with the Doctor's mention of critique. It might show the image of an ordinary Muslim who is exhausted by the requirements of prayer and does not seek to renew the motivation to do so. Prayer might stand for all the requirements enjoined upon Muslims that he nevertheless feels unattached and attracted to. It might show an ordinary Muslim who finds the call to moral reform of the self through disciplinary practice hollow, quiet, or even disagreeable. He trades the respect of other Muslims for their insults by drinking alcohol. And since they already heap insults on him, why bother dying his reputation in any other color? When the prayer mat required for conducting his prayers is so threadbare, why repair it?

Much scholarship in anthropology and the study of Sufi poetry in Islamic studies has been devoted to discerning the lineaments of what I glossed above as the first reading.¹³ Very little scholarly attention has been given to the second reading, a fact that is all the more surprising when one considers how popular such a reading is in some Muslim societies. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is one scholar who has briefly addressed this prospect and I turn to his remarks as indicative of a commonly available reaction. While the general goal of his short essay on Khayyam (2006: 165-183) is to emphasize Khayyam's intellectual importance as a philosopher, there are a few passing remarks about Khayyam's reception that answer those who would prefer the second reading. Nasr introduces his remarks by identifying two figures in recent Iranian history with a resurgence of interest in Khayyam's poetry. These figures are characterized by their adherence to a set of ideologies that Nasr takes as a rejection of Islamic traditions:

¹³ Exemplary of this effort in the field of Islamic Studies is Ernst (1997). See below for a discussion of the works in anthropology.

communism, scientific materialism, agnosticism and antireligious activism (166). Nasr goes on to say:

“In fact no person in Persian literature has been used as often as Khayyam in modern times to depict whatever sense of rebellion against revelation, religious doubt, hedonistic tendency, or even feeling of suicide might have existed within the mind of certain figures who have then claimed to be authentic interpreters of Khayyam in question. [*sic*][...] In dealing with the philosophy of Khayyam and its interpretation we are therefore dealing not only with an intellectual question but also with one that for some is an existential matter and touches the very foundations of their secularized worldview for which they have sought historical legitimacy by identifying their personal and subjective states with the thought of Khayyam.” (167)

At the conclusion of the essay he writes:

“Khayyam must be resuscitated as an Islamic philosopher [...] The present study should, however, be sufficient to reveal the great significance—philosophical, scientific, and also religious—of a remarkable Islamic philosopher, whose very fame on the mundane plan has caused his philosophical importance to become veiled from the world at large.” (183)

I draw attention to several features of Nasr’s discussion: First, a common sense association is depicted between a ‘secularized worldview’ and ‘rebellion against religion.’ These associated states are then described as ‘subjective,’ having ‘existed within the mind’ *prior* to the appearance of Khayyam. Thus the citation of Khayyam appears as a kind of rhetorical trick, a façade that lends legitimacy to a way of living that is essentially illegitimate. At least three things are left unaccounted for in this explanation: 1.) the sense in which a way of living may have been formed by a particular interpretation of Khayyam; 2.) how it is that one might feel a profound attraction or inner binding to a particular interpretation of Khayyam; and 3.) the possibility that one recognize and uphold the paradox of one’s attachment to both Khayyam *and* certain aspects of a ‘secularized worldview.’ The picture of modern subjectivity that emerges here is one of seamless unity in which disenchanted, secularized Muslims regard poetry

as inert matter that they can shape according to their strategic needs. To put it in terms of the texture that I seek to render here, I would say that this picture renders a smooth texture, in which a secular way of living has fully subsumed and subjected the religious attraction or force of Khayyam's poetry.

It is one task of an anthropology of Islam to enrich this simplistic picture. Taking up the work of scholars in neighboring disciplines that challenge the sufficiency of secular thought's story of its own disenchantment (e.g., Connolly 1999, Bennett 2001), several scholars have sought to show how the ways of living available to contemporary Muslims are deeply entrenched in modern forms of media and state governance in cosmopolitan cities (Agrama 2012; Deeb 2001; Hirschkind 2006). Each of these studies usefully takes up Talal Asad's (1986) starting point for the anthropology of Islam as a discursive tradition and they aim to illuminate the lives of Muslims who straightforwardly endorse the authority of that discursive tradition for their everyday lives. These studies show a dense layering of modern subjectivity through which secularizing processes are woven into the fabric of living that upholds the authoritative discourse and practice of Islam. But how might modern Muslims go about everyday life without endorsing that authority so straightforwardly? What kind of different postures toward Islamic traditions can be sustained in everyday life?

The difference that most interests me is not the fact that many Muslims become materialists and atheists and describe their lives in terms of the individual rights and liberties proper to modern state governance whose absence they take as a definitive feature of contemporary Muslim societies (Ibn Warraq 2003). Nor is it the fact that some Muslims readily confess the waxing and waning of their motivation and commitment to

take up pious pursuits (Schielke 2009). What interests me is the way that many Muslims express as much disappointment with pietistic pursuits as they do with the liberal fantasies of autonomy, privacy and freedom, and that they sustain attractions to some aspects of Islam while turning away from much that is commonly regarded as foundational to Islam. These disappointments are not only expressed as critique in the forums commonly identified as public. Critique and disappointment are woven into conversations with kin, friends and others throughout the community. They often emerge in conversation alongside references to Qur'an, *hadith*, Western philosophers and artists, politicians—and of course, as the Doctor's comments show, Sufi poetry.

Disappointment, critique and abiding uncertainties are not merely a cognitive posture toward a set of claims whose truth value is under question. It is a more pervasive condition that draws together certain claims about Islam with a wide range of ongoing relationships with Muslims who makes those claims audible. In other words, those Muslims who are inclined to the second reading of Khayyam's poet do not merely exist as autonomous individuals who possess worldviews and express those views in periodicals. They live as brothers, daughters, mothers, fathers and friends of pietistic Muslims with whom they share an ongoing conversation sometimes marked by kindness and forgiveness, sometimes by injury and annoyance. My goal in the chapters that follow is to learn about the kind of living available to Muslims who sustain an orientation to Islam that is different from that of their intimates.

Let me briefly clarify one aspect of the difference that is at the heart of this dissertation. Of the many requirements made of Muslims, five are considered

foundational.¹⁴ Of these five, two are the most conspicuous on a daily basis in Kurdistan: daily prayers and fasting during the month of Ramazan.¹⁵ These two criteria are themselves not always stable or clear ways of dividing up kinds or types of Muslims, but they are quite commonly evoked as markers of one's orientation to Islam. Those who do not fulfill these two obligations are not readily classified by a particular term. Of course there is a range of terms that each do different work in different contexts. These include *bêdîn* (irreligious), *bêbewar* (without belief), *'almaniye* (secular), *mulhîd* (atheist), and *kafir* (infidel). We will consider several of these in the chapters to come but I mention them now to avoid the trap of a kind of lingualism that might suppose the absence of a single, common word indicates the incoherence of a phenomenon. It will become clear that the various attitudes toward Islam that I discuss in the following chapters are perfectly ordinary even to the most pietistic Muslims in contemporary Kurdistan. The lack of decisive terminology does nothing to compromise that ordinariness. With the title 'a threadbare prayer mat' I gesture toward an attitude and a sensibility that is better evoked by a paradoxical and poetic image than a technical term. In the ethnographic chapters that follow, my hope is to render palpable the texture of living and the uncertainties that accompany this attitude. Perhaps it is precisely because this texture of living evades the terms and categories of established Islamic discourse that it *must* be rendered ethnographically in a text that traces the texture of paradoxes in everyday life.

¹⁴ This is the category of the *wajib* within the *shari'a*, the polar opposite of the *haram* or forbidden, and set apart from the recommended (*mandub*), neutral (*mubah*) and the disapproved (*makruh*) (Hallaq 2009:84). The five obligations of every Muslim are traced to a *hadith* of the Prophet in which he defines *Islam* as "built upon five: the double-testimony that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God; performance of the prayer; payment of alms-tax; performance of pilgrimage; and fasting during the month of Ramadan" (*ibid.* 225).

In tracing that texture, I hope to provide a more nuanced picture of modern Muslims' attraction to poets like Khayyam.

Research & Writing

This dissertation is based on ethnographic and archival research conducted between January 2008 and December 2009. This research built on relations that emerged from three summers of preliminary fieldwork (2004, 2005, 2006) in which I worked with artists, poets, journalists and secular intellectuals (*roshinbîr*). Through preliminary research I learned that Kurdish Muslims had overlapping projects of critique that took as their object the Kurdistan Regional Government, Islamist political groups, politically inactive revivalist strands of Islam, general social and particularly gender norms in Kurdistan and, in a reflexive movement, the kinds of criticism already at work among and between intellectuals. I further learned of an intertwining of poetry and critique both in recent Kurdish history and in the personal biographies of prominent critics. (It was the poets who doubled as journalists through the long period of Kurdish struggle against the Iraqi state and continued to work for the media outlets of political parties after the establishment of the Kurdistan Region in 1992.) In the time I spent with groups of people where these roles seemed fluid and flexible, I had often heard Muslims spurning their duties of prayer and fasting and plying larger critiques against what they regarded as the principle tenants of Islam. So I began research in 2008 with two primary questions: How has the history of Kurdish poetry come to shape the practice of critique? What kinds of ethical lives are available to Kurdish Muslims who turn away from pietistic discourses?

I began by reading their publications extensively, conducting interviews and holding extensive conversations with both contemporary poets and secular intellectuals. In those conversations, I learned that many practicing poets did not consider themselves ‘critics.’ I was surprised to discover that while they were they were deeply invested in modern literature from Europe, America, Latin America, and the Arabic, Persian and Turkish literature of the Middle East, many had only a passing familiarity with the classical tradition of Kurdish poetry. In a similar vein, while the intellectuals who called their work (usually for newspapers and other periodicals) critique commonly cited European thinkers in their writing, they rarely mentioned Kurdish poets. However, when I asked these critics *how* they learned critique, they quite often began to describe a family member who was well versed in Kurdish poetry. This is what first drew my attention to the role of poetry and intimate relations in forging a sensibility that was poised to take up the secular task of critique. It was also crucial in reorienting my understanding of a relationship between intimate relations and the debates that could be tracked in (or beyond) what some call a public sphere (Salvatore 2007). I now understand that as a reversal of perspective between the background of family life and the foreground of political debate. Rather than taking intimate relations as a domain in which political actors are prepared for entry into public debate, I began to ask how public debates provide a background against which intimate relations may proceed. I return to this below.

These discoveries also inspired me to study the classical tradition of poetry more closely. In lieu of the archival research into the practice of critique in periodicals, I took to the archive of poetry. For the intensive study of poetic texts, I found neither critics nor

poets the most insightful. I often studied with non-professionals whose deep love for poetry animated their ongoing practice of reading and their willingness to offer me their tutelage. I also began to investigate the history of the *hucre* system that had sustained the life of the classical poetry that captivated me. This is what led me to the teashop, and also to a young *Mele* who, alongside his studies at a local university, had tenaciously sought out the individualized education that was carried out in a piecemeal fashion by the handful of scholars who prized the old style of instruction. More precious to him than his university degree was the license (*icaze*) that he had received connecting him through a lineage of scholars to the Prophet Muhammad. On the authority of this latter achievement he agreed to offer me instruction in a field of Arabic grammar (*serf*) in the old style. That instruction was the kernel around which grew many conversations about the history of the Naqshbandi *terîqet* and the *hucre* in Kurdistan (it also allowed me to struggle along listening to the riddles posed by the old men in the teashop). Contemporary critique had led me to classical poetry, and classical poetry brought me to (the remains of) the *hucre*.

When I left Kurdistan and took up the task of writing, I was guided by a new question. Given the demise of the *hucre* system, and the attendant separation of poetry from knowledge and virtue, I wanted to know: does poetry bear moral force in the texture of daily living? If so, what kind of moral force; and how does that force emerge? In her study of Classical and Egyptian varieties of Arabic, Niloofar Haeri (2003) notes that when fragments of the Qur'an or prayers in Classical Arabic appear in the course of everyday Egyptian Arabic, they "infuse the language with a spiritual quality" (37). This

resonated with my sense of poetry's effect on some conversations I had in Kurdistan¹⁶ so I combed my field notes for the occasions when poetry was cited or recited in the course of casual conversation in a seemingly spontaneous way. I discovered approximately 30 such occasions. Examining these occasions, I found that many bore a similar spiritual quality or what I call here "moral force." That is not to say that poetry is a source of a consistent vision or discourse of virtue as the Qur'an is for pious Muslims. Poetry as such does not provide a moral orientation to the world that can be adopted or adapted in practice. But when poetry is examined within the context of its appearance in daily life, I began to see how it bears a kind of moral force by showing the kinds of relations one inhabits, both to Islam and to others.

From the list of 30 occasions of recitation, I began to write about those whose moral force was most clear to me. I found that the clarity of the moral force of the poetry was directly related to my knowledge of relationships into which it was woven: knowing poetry required of me some *knowledge* of the texture of relationships in everyday life. I then focused on those relations that were defined in part by difference of religious orientation, in which it was a Muslim whose pious kin regard them as wayward whom I knew best. For this reason, the chapters that follow sometimes resemble portraits in the sense that they focus on a single person. But the subjects of these portraits neither stand still nor do they stand alone since over the course of their lifetime, or a year, or even a

¹⁶ There is a fundamental paradox in the relationship of poetic speech and the divine speech of the Qur'an: the Qur'an was sent down from God as the final revelation, a flawless piece of divine speech that could not be imitated by humans; yet humans recognize its beauty precisely in the poetic qualities by which an equivalence is set up between the truth that is revealed, and the form of its expression. *While the Qur'an explicitly declares that it is not poetry*, and derides poets in the following terms (26:224-6) "And the Poets,- It is those straying in Evil, who follow them: Seest thou not that they wander distracted in every valley? And that they say what they practise not?" (see Irfan Shahid's lengthy exegeses in 1965, 1983, 2004) . Of course, this denunciation has done as much to inspire poets as caution them.

single conversation, they respond to the connections, obligations, memories and imaginations of others. The moral force of poetry, I began to discover, sometime enabled intimate relations characterized by different orientations to Islam.

Meanwhile a conversation moved forward among scholars about the concepts and practices of critique in contemporary world vis-à-vis Muslim societies (Asad et. al 2009) and through secular governance more generally (Calhoun et. al., 2011, Warner et. al. 2010). I have come to see my writing less as a contribution to move the debate forward and more as an effort to refresh its stakes. As insightful as those studies have been, they generally take as a starting point what Asad called the “foreground” of political principles. For example, the controversy surrounding the Danish cartoons that depicted and defamed the Prophet needed to be placed within the trajectory of secular governance and the ascendance of liberalism in the West. The practice of critique as it appeared in the debates of that controversy can only be understood when placed within the genealogy of modern state governance and the emergence of a particular form of subjectivity—particular in part for its imagination (and politically active projection) of itself as universal:

“The practice of secular criticism is now a sign of the modern, of the modern subject’s relentless pursuit of truth and freedom, of his or her political agency. It has almost become a *duty*, closely connected to the right to free expression and communication.” (Asad 2009: 54-5)

In the foreground of these discussions are the principles of freedom and political agency—now taken for granted by modern subjects whose critical attitude is the “the essence of secular heroism” (*ibid.* 55). The distinction between foreground and background is something Asad had described in an earlier essay. After noting that the

idea of free speech is limited not only by law but also by the requirements *that* someone listens, *who* exactly listens and *how* they listen, Asad goes on to pose an important question that touches upon my concerns as well:

How have different conceptions and practices of religion helped to form the ability of listeners to be publicly responsive? This last question applies not only to persons who consider themselves religious but to those for whom religion is distasteful or dangerous. For the *experience* of religion in the ‘private’ spaces of home and school is crucial to the formation of subjects who will eventually inhabit a particular public culture. It determines not only the ‘background’ by which shared principles of that culture are interpreted, but also what is to count as interpretive ‘background’ as against ‘foreground’ political principles.” (2003: 185)

I am interested in the way in which political principles become a background against which intimate relations proceed. The temporality of everyday life affords a distinctive perspective that often does not match the temporality of public debate. This is not only because it is brothers, fathers and mothers who are Islamists, secular intellectuals, or poets. It is because from the perspective of the temporality of everyday life, one sees how a brother, a father or a mother become an Islamist, a secular intellectual or a poet. One is often led to imagine them ceasing to be so, and this imagination forms part of the texture of relationships. From this perspective, the claims that win assent or support in public settings are sometimes brought under tremendous pressure at home. Conversely, there may be great contradictions between the kinds of claims lodged in public forums such as periodicals and the kinds of attractions and attachments that persist in everyday life. Instead of beginning with the foreground of a political conflict where relatively clear political principles may be discerned, I begin with the background of the everyday, with such events as a brother’s invitation to pray or a father’s encouragement to fast. Within the texture of everyday living the political principles at work in such gestures are

often difficult to perceive and the responsiveness appropriate to them is difficult to achieve. In this context “secular heroism” might threaten relationships with disintegration, but critique is plied in more subtle ways.

The reversal I am describing here can refresh the stakes of the debate on critique insofar as it highlights the generativity of everyday life as a space from which critique emerges. For it is not only secular thought that can ground or authorize a critique of Islam. Indeed, the chapters to come show Muslims explicitly refusing the adequacy of such key secular concepts as the privacy of belief. And neither is a critique of Islam necessarily part of the ongoing struggle for orthodoxy that characterizes Islamic traditions (Asad 1993: 217). There is a critique that emerges from everyday life that does not exemplify the totalizing discourses of Islam or the secular state and does not arrogate for itself their authority. Subsisting beyond the public foreground of newspaper articles, demonstrations, social movements, the *telos* of this critique is not a particular state form or even a particular kind of community. Born in everyday life, it dies there too, as it were. But so long as this critique lives it animates intimate relations; it is a part of a distinctive *texture* of living that weaves difference and paradox together into the prospect of a shared future. So if research had led me from critique to poetry, writing about poetry allows me to return to questions of critique. It brought me back to the teashop where the Doctor’s exclamation of Mewlewi’s poem as philosophy turned on its being both repentance and critique.

The Chapters

In each of the following chapters, an occasion of the citation or recitation of poetry is like a navel from which the analysis of the chapter grows.¹⁷ Throughout the chapters I sustain my threefold interest in the moral force of poetry, the ethical lives of Muslims who turn away from pietistic discourses, and the relationships that are sustained by this kind of living. Because my analysis is like a *tracing*, *following*, or *tracking* of the themes that emerge from the texture of everyday life, the arguments of the following chapters each take up different concepts for thinking. Rather than forcing each chapter to speak directly to the general themes of my interest, I allow them to address different concepts that I had not foreseen even in the intermediary stages of writing. Beginning with the background of intimate relations, the concepts that render themselves for analysis are *desire*, *beauty* and *pleasure*. My broadest claim is that by refining our understanding of how these concepts are embedded in everyday life we can better appreciate both the texture of living that emerges between Kurdish Muslims differently oriented toward pietistic Islamic discourses and the moral force of poetry within that texture. Chapter Three performs a step-by-step demonstration of the manner in which I discovered generative *questions* through fieldwork, then sought companionship for those questions in scholarship that takes up these concepts in anthropology, philosophy, and Islamic Studies. Anticipating the work of that chapter, I introduce the three ethnographic chapters now by describing the kind of companionship I found for my questions in

¹⁷ Acknowledging that different domains of communication allow for a different vocabulary of quotation (Goodman 1978), in this dissertation I employ a general distinction between *recitation* as the explicit direct quoting of a poem, and *citation*, as including all other kinds of reference such as the mention of poet's name, the theme of a poem, some of its distinctive vocabulary, or other modes of allusion. Below I provide more technical detail on the system for classifying kinds or types of quotation that was developed within the broader traditions of Islamic scholarship.

broader scholarship on the concepts in question. I will explain how the work of these chapters leads me to a fourth and final chapter.

Chapter One follows the poetic idiom of desire across several registers in the life of a man whom I call Serdar. Although his moral striving does not take place within the disciplined bounds of a Sufi path, he was deeply attracted to the idiom of love through which Sufi poets expressed their love of the divine. In order to elucidate the occasions on which he cited this poetry in conversations otherwise focused on everyday relationships, I ask how the poetic idiom comes to bear force in his life. In this effort I turn to the work of Islamic studies scholar Michael Sells who describes the ‘infinity of desire’ as an idea that has informed Sufi expressions of desire in diverse Muslim societies. After tracing the appearance of the idiom of desire through relations with his wife, his brother and others, I suggest that through bearing up the grief that comes from the inevitable failures of desire in intimate relationships, the notion of a divine lover comes to express his own aspirations to a shared future with others.

Chapter Two traces permutations of beauty across several different occasions in the life of a poet whom I call Pexshan. Beginning with scenes from her childhood, then proceeding to occasions in which she confronted the general expectation that she find beauty in the texts and practices of Islam, I examine her disappointment with Islam. In resisting the urge to search for the criteria of experiences of beauty that would show them as normative or transgressive, I find companionship in Wittgenstein’s remarks that expressions about beauty might be examined on the distinctive occasion of their utterance. This methodological procedure allows me to discern the paradoxes of beauty’s appearance in conversations with Pexshan: While she once spurns the duty of all

Muslims to fast, she later finds the practice inhabitable when attached to the beauty of Zoroastrianism. These paradoxical relations to Islam through beauty allow her to connect with a community of Muslims who fast during the month of Ramazan.

Chapter Three follows the concept of pleasure around several different kinds of encounter in the life of a man whom I call Niyaz. Beginning with scenes in which encounters with poetry occasion pleasure, I am led to ask what the ethical import of pleasure might be. Drawing from Baruch Spinoza's definition of pleasure, I review some recent work in anthropology in an attempt to develop a concept of pleasure as an ethical posture of receptivity toward the world that enables ongoing encounters and relations with others. While Niyaz sustains such a posture both toward his pious intimates and toward his imagination of some great Sufi figures, I turn to the writings of those very figures to demonstrate how Niyaz's failure to find pleasure in the Muslim duty of prayer presents a potentially dangerous fissure in his relations. The work of sustaining those relations comes about only by bearing up under abiding uncertainties.

In each of these chapters my concern is to analyze a fragment of poetry within the context of the specific occasion on which it appeared. Taking poetry as fragmented and occasional is not alien to the intellectual traditions that once flourished in the *hucra* in Kurdistan. The poetry of Mewlewi is renowned for its occasional nature, the context of its composition being described by the Arabic term *munasabah*—literally, 'occasion.' In order to understand a poem, it was often necessary to know that it had been composed on the occasion of—to take the most famous examples—the death of his wife or the burning of his library. While knowledge of such occasions was often passed down orally, Qaradaghi (2008) attests that many manuscripts of Mewlewi's poetry also contained

prosaic marginalia detailing the occasions on which a given poem was composed.

Mudarris' edition of the *dīwan* often integrates this knowledge. For example, for the poem recited to me by the man in the teashop, Mudarris reports (1378: 368) that Mewlewi was accompanying the funeral procession of Qadr Beg who had been killed by a stray bullet. Upon passing the grave of Seyd Khalil (a descendent of one of the Imams), Mewlewi composed this poem. Given this knowledge, one can see how the poem exemplifies the attitude of humility toward those endowed with virtue and blessings.

As for the fragmented nature of poetry, its acknowledgement was a cornerstone of the science of rhetoric or *bulagha*. El-Rouayheb (2006) has pointed out that it was largely Kurdish and Persian scholars who were responsible for the fluorescence of this science in the late Ottoman period. As an inheritor of this rich tradition, Mudarris composed a brief summary of this science in Kurdish in the late twentieth century. Published in 1991, the first section of this work outlines the types and kinds of eloquence proper to poetry, providing definitions and examples for each type. Before turning to the science of rhyme and meter (the '*aruz*' described above) in the second section, Mudarris concludes the first section of the book as follows:

The last issue of this book is concerned with *sarqat sh'irīyya*, which is stealing a poetic utterance (*lafz*) or poetic meaning (*ma'ana*). The important point of this issue is this: in his own work a poet has used an expression (*'ibarat*) or explained a meaning, then after him another poet comes and takes up the expression or the meaning, makes it his own and uses it in his own poetry. (59)

Mudarris goes on to specify various subgenres of this type:

If one of the two poets is much more careful than the other, and his composition is much more subtle, it is possible for him to become known as the predecessor or *muqaddam*, and if the other steals this composition, that other can become known as a thief. But the true meaning of theft becomes apparent when the second

fellow in his own poetry uses the exact same meaning *and all the utterances* of the predecessor—doubtless that will be called theft. Indeed if the meaning of a preceding poet's poem is taken up along with the transformation of some slight meaning into a different meaning, whether all of the utterances or some of them are changed, then this procedure is called *ighara w masakh*, which is to say 'putting onto' and 'transformation.' (60)

The *transformation* of a poetic utterance as it appears in everyday life is precisely what preoccupies me in the first three chapters. My analysis attends to the transformation of poetry as it is rendered in new contexts through citation and recitation. Poetry is rendered in fragments because it is sometimes the expression itself (*lefz*), sometimes the idea or meaning (*mana*) of a poem, and sometimes the mention of a poem that appears in the course of conversation in daily life.¹⁸ The prominence of this theme in the Islamic sciences, though, begs a question: Is the moral force of poetic fragments in sustaining intimate relations unique to the texture of everyday life in contemporary Kurdistan, or might it also have precedent in the intellectual traditions supported by the *hucre*?

The Fourth Chapter pursues this question through an investigation into the epistolary letters of Mawlana Khalid Naqshbandi. A pillar of intellectual and spiritual revival within Kurdistan in the early nineteenth century, Mawlana Khalid is also widely known throughout Muslim societies from Istanbul to Mecca, the United States, and Indonesia (van Bruinessen 1990). Taking up the collection of his letters edited by Mele Abdulkarim Mudarris (which continues to circulate in Kurdistan today, and was recently translated into Kurdish [Berzencî 2009; Fetah 2009]), I read those letters in light of the

¹⁸ I have learned much from studies that take up the fragment as the result of violent events that shatter the coherence of daily life (Das 2007), as the only condition of archival research on subaltern groups (Pandey 1992), and as the distinctly modern condition in which once more coherent 'traditions' appear in everyday life (Pandian 2008). Each of these is relevant to an aspect of poetry's appearance in contemporary Kurdistan. The aspect that holds my attention throughout this dissertation, though, is the sensibility I draw from Mudarris' description of fragments, in which one can see how a 'tradition' was always already constituted by tarrying with fragments. Here the question is less whether one's utterance can stand alongside what preceded it than whether one can make an utterance one's own, even if it also belongs to another.

concepts of beauty, pleasure and desire developed in the first three chapters. My effort is to not suggest that the ways of living I came to know through conversation in Kurdish in 2004—2009 were somehow anticipated by the practice of correspondence carried out (in a distinctive epistolary genre in Arabic and Persian) before Mawlana Khalid's death in 1827. But I do want to show how the concepts of beauty, pleasure and desire can also be seen to animate relations among men who are commonly regarded by Kurdish Muslims as demonstrating a peak of pietistic striving. Attending carefully to the work of language and the weaving of poetry into the text of these letters, I show that even in relationships grounded in a pietistic striving (to which the concepts of discursive tradition and poetic practice are indispensable), the moral force of poetry belongs in its capacity to animate relationships that are threatened by separation. Rather than a social history of poetry in Kurdistan, I argue that these letters are part of a possible genealogy (Khan 2012) for the way in which poetry has come to animate intimate relations in 21st century Kurdistan. Neither exclusive to the practices of pious Muslims, nor reducible to the secularization of Kurdish Muslims, this capacity to animate belongs to the texture of the everyday that receives and transforms both of those discourses even as it bears up uncertainties accentuated by religious difference.

This dissertation enacts the claim that learning the texture of poetic fragments in everyday life is a kind of knowing. Such learning was not accomplished in fieldwork, but has continued through writing and rewriting these chapters. I hope it may continue in their reading.

CHAPTER ONE

“God becomes a lover”: A Husband’s Desire

The Infinity of Desire

In an essay devoted to love poetry as an expression of Muslim spiritual aspirations in a classical milieu, Michael Sells identifies a perennial question: “Why are the poems most loved by the religious and the nonreligious alike those in which the identity of the object of desire (divine or human) is as ambiguous as the desire itself is infinite?” (2002: 206) Formulated in this way, the question speaks to the concerns of Muslim poets and lovers of poetry in various arenas. Sells connects this question to a case that is familiar to many versed in Arabic mystical poetry: that of Ibn Arabi’s collection of poems *The Interpreter of Desires*, in which the description of his encounter with a Persian woman mirrors his mystical encounter with the divine. Elaborating on the concept of the infinity of desire, Sells grounds this notion in two features of pre-Islamic poetry that are carried forward to the Islamic traditions in Arabic and Persian languages. First, the dialectic of nearness and distance between lover and beloved, according to which “to the extent that the beloved is near, the poet is disoriented or even driven out of consciousness by the intensity of the nearness. To the extent she is distant, the persona of the poet-lover is equally in a state of longing” (201). Second, the dialectic of expression and inability to express: “The infinity of desire is reflected in love lyric by the unlimited digressive trajectory of the description of the beloved. The rhetoric of description masks the inability of the poet to capture the beloved through any definition of characteristics. The more the poem speaks of the beloved, the more the poem digresses through a chain of interior associations away

from any image of her whatsoever” (202). These features map neatly onto the ambiguity of the divine or human aspects of the figure of the beloved, so that two clear analogies are expressed: as the mystic approaches or withdraws from the divine, so the lover approaches or withdraws from the beloved; and as the mystic struggles to describe a God that admits of no comparison, so the lover yearns to describe the beloved who exceeds comparison.

This ambiguity concerning the identity of the beloved has been a perennial concern for scholars, poets, and lovers of Islamic poetry. One testament to this is the vast tradition of criticism and commentary on the topic in various Islamicate languages. Another testament is the passion with which this poetry is read, heard, memorized, recited and invoked by lovers of poetry who may not identify as poets or scholars. Serdar was one such lover of poetry in Kurdistan who was most interested in the poetry of his native tongue, Sorani Kurdish, which began to flourish in early 19th-century Kurdistan and was associated with a broad revival in both the religious sciences and Sufi thought and practice. The poets from that era (writing what is now called "classical poetry") were deeply immersed in the life of Sufi paths as well as the traditions of Arabic and Persian poetry that were strong in those paths. Yet even though Serdar was fluent in Arabic and conversant in Farsi, he never mentioned reading poetry in those languages. And although daily life among Muslims in Kurdistan acquainted him with the practice of the Naqshbandi and Qadri Sufi paths, Serdar never took up the path of Sufi practice. In fact, when the discussion turned to Islam, Serdar was quick to point out all of the "killing" (*kushtin*), "filth" (*pîsî*), and "lies" (*dro*) that were peddled in its name. He neither prayed nor fasted, which are the two duties of all Muslims that make the most common

distinction in contemporary Kurdistan between who is *dîndar* and who is otherwise. *Dîndar* translates almost literally as "one who's got religion." But there is not a colloquial word in Sorani Kurdish to describe the common phenomenon of those Muslims who are neither pious nor *dîndar*, nor hypocrite, nor atheist, nor infidel, nor unbeliever, but simply *otherwise*. Serdar sometimes joked that he only went to the mosque on the occasion of a funeral or when in need of a public restroom. We met regularly to drink 'erak, or beer, or sometimes wine, and he told me more than once, in a tone of dismissal, that he was only Muslim on his state-issued identity card. In his conversations with our mutual acquaintances and with me, Serdar took it for granted that he was no *dîndar*. What kind of *otherwise* might he be or become?

Posed in this way, the problem recalls one aspect of Sells' question described above that has received very little attention—that an attractive force of Sufi-inflected love poetry works not only among those with pious aspirations, but also among those who are in some sense "nonreligious." In taking up Sells' question for my own inquiry, then, I will focus less on the ambiguity of the identity of the beloved (human or divine) than on the concept of the infinity of desire. The question that animates this chapter is the following: If the infinity of desire continues to animate attraction to love poetry, but cannot be explained as a function of the pious mystic's aspiration to union with a transcendent divine, then what is the texture of desire and how does it emerge? In asking about texture, I mean to emphasize that the desire at stake is not something private, interior, or individualized, but something that emerges in a movement with and against others. In taking desire as emergent, I mean to highlight the ethnographic method of my inquiry. By this method, I do not assume in advance either the unity or separation of the

mystical and ordinary registers, but I trace the staggered appearance of desire across time in my conversations with Serdar in order to discover how he forges relations between these two registers.¹ This chapter takes up four scenes of conversations that I shared with Serdar in which the texture of desire emerges in relation to others, primarily his brother, his spouse, and his friends. These conversations were very ordinary ones, but they shall draw our attention to the manner in which ordinary speech absorbs, inflects, and reworks poetic and mystical registers.

This chapter brings together the themes of erotic language in mystical poetry with the study of everyday life to contribute to ongoing conversations in anthropology and Islamic studies in three ways. First, to the study of erotic language in Sufi texts I offer an examination of how the recitation and circulation of mystical poetry beyond devotional contexts continues to animate the ethical life of Muslims in contemporary urban settings. Many scholars have been concerned to give an account of erotic Sufi poetry in terms of the central themes of discourse and practice in Islam (Chittick 1983, Lewisohn 1995, Massignon 1984, Tourage 2007). By tracing the development of this language as a genre of ecstatic expression (Ernst 1985) and even as a comprehensive philosophical system that articulates an "ontology of love" (Lumbard 2003, 2007), scholars have distinguished the language of spiritual aspiration from so-called "profane" love theory (Bell 1976, Giffen 1971) and defending it against the accusation that love theory in Islam is merely adapted from Christian or Hindu sources (Sells 2002). Historians of the Ottoman Empire

¹ In this sense, I draw from Marilyn Strathern's work on the emergence of analogous relations between persons and objects in Melanesia. What I take as a methodological claim in that work defines my own approach to the discovery of an "analogy" between the mystical and ordinary registers of desire: "It is not the way anthropologists control the analogies, then, that seems at issue, but the way the actors do." (2004, 76) Another way to pose the question of this chapter, then, is: How does Serdar render mystical and ordinary desires analogous?

have demonstrated how the erotic language of spiritual aspiration that was common to Muslim societies in that era (El-Rouayheb 2005, Ze'evi 2006). Other scholars have shown how encounters with European colonial powers exacerbated anxiety about such expressions, which led to suppression of these tendencies in Muslim societies in the Middle East and South Asia (Kugle 2001, Massad 2007). But in the midst of a surging interest in Islamic studies—and the study of sexuality in particular—the question of how erotic poetry continues to bear traction in the everyday lives of Muslims outside of devotional contexts or explicit political gestures remains unexplored.²

Second, in linking this erotic language to the workings of desire in everyday life, this chapter also contributes to a growing body of anthropological inquiry on the work of desire in intimate relations. Within anthropology, I take Margaret Trawick's ethnography of Tamil family life as an inaugural effort to consider how the effort to sustain or reproduce kinship ties is conditioned by the work of desire. Trawick argues that "it is possible to see kinship not as a static form upheld by regnant or shared principles, but as a web maintained by unrelieved tension, an architecture of conflicting desire, its symmetry a symmetry of imbalance." (1992: 152). Trawick explicitly claims a Lacanian approach for these insights, and other anthropologists have also learned from that approach (e.g. Ewing 1997, Pandolfo 1997). But insofar as Trawick's work emphasizes the affective work of desire in conditioning intimate kin relations, one may also discern a certain resonance with the work of Veena Das and others. These scholars have sought to understand how intimate relationships emerge in time both through imagining a new self and acknowledging the separateness of the other. In the case of a family where Muslim

² In addition, the circulation of "classical" works in social life has itself been only sparsely attended to, cf. Mills 1994.

and Hindu idioms and identities were in continual flux, Das observes, “It turned out that each person in the family was trying to make slow shifts in his or her orientation to the divine, to prayer, and to ritual performances, as well as adjustments in the question of to which community he or she belonged” (2010: 392). Rather than relating the work of desire to a constitutive lack in the subject, Das and others have highlighted how abiding uncertainties in intimate relationships are inflected through the intertwining of religious languages (Das 2010), everyday terms of address within families (Goodfellow n.d.) and ongoing conditions of economic crisis (Han 2012). Taking up this line of inquiry, then, the present chapter investigates the invocation of erotic poetry and the poetic register of language within a Kurdish man’s reflections on the uncertainty of relations brought about by religious difference within his family.

Finally, because the intimate desire I address is fraught with tension of a religious nature, this chapter also contributes to ongoing debates on religious difference. As will become clear, the notion of religious difference at stake here is less that between devotees of different religions (cf. Burgel 1999, Das 2010, Lewis 2009), than the difference that is spawned within Islamic traditions. Scholars have explored the productivity of such difference in terms of sect (*mazhab*) and shown how the articulation of spiritual aspiration both draws elements from diverse sects (Hyder 2008, Khan 2006) and relies on agonistic relations between them (Khan 2012). Other studies have shown how accusations of heresy and apostasy have worked to regulate norms of doctrine and practice (Hirschkind 1996, Tareen 2009), often by prescribing a path to repentance (Friedmann 2003). While the attractions of religious difference and the threats of accusations of infidelity (*kufir*) are integral to our inquiry, we here draw attention to

another difference: the fissures, uncertainties, and anxieties that accompany relations between those who stridently labor toward piety and those who turn away from such labor toward an as-yet-undefined *otherwise*. What is the role of poetry in this turning?

Nari & Tayer Beg, Khayyam, Imam Ali

Early in 2008, I met Serdar for a walk at the main bazaar in Suleimani. Soon after we met I inquired about his wife and children: their health, his wife's work, and the children's work in school. In his response he also spoke of his father and his brother, and mentioned that his brother, a devout Muslim, was involved with Islamist (*islami*) groups in Suleimani. Given Serdar's own relationship with Islam, I expressed my surprise and interest in his brother's involvement with those groups. Serdar responded by describing the features of such a movement that he thought attracted his brother to it: it is a "system of morality" (*sîstemî axlaqî*), he said, and the people who are involved with that movement all love each other and help one another. He also said that his brother often advised him to pray, and when I asked how he responded, Serdar said,

I don't say anything.

I asked, "Does he think you are someone who you are not?"

*No, but it seems to him that I believe, that's all. (Na, bes pêy waye bawerm heye.)
But we get along well.*

I then asked, "What does your father think of that [his brother's involvement with Islamists]?" Serdar responded by mimicking his father's lack of concern through the gesture of sucking his teeth to produce a sound like *tshck*. Since he had used the word *system* (*sîstem*) in reference to his brother's "Islamist" orientation, I used that word in my

next question to him: “Well it’s clear that you’re not with that system of morality that is Islamist, but I wonder what your system of morals is—or is it a system?”

*It does have a system.
[But] it is a natural system (sîstemêkî srushtî).
For example, I cannot take your freedom away from you.*

He then began to describe Imam Ali. He said that he had read a lot about the history of Islam. Then he said:

Although I’m Sunni, I feel like I love Imam Ali more than anyone else in the history of Islam.

“Why?” I asked.

Because he’s smart (zîrek) and peace-loving (ashtîxwaz).

He then told a story to demonstrate, which also suggested that this "anyone else" might include the Prophet himself. When the Prophet captured a city, he would kill everyone. Once, Ali had subjugated a group of fighters in a battle, and one of them spit on his face. But even though the warrior spit in his face, Ali did not kill him.³

We walked on for several paces without speaking, suffering the distractions of the bazaar. Then he started to speak again and I recall noticing the strange diction of his speech, feeling confused and not understanding what he was saying until I heard a rhyme and I realized that he was reciting a poem. He recited beautifully to my ears, untrained as they were at that early stage in my research. His voice was steady and assured:

*Be Gemzey chawî mexmurî siyahî mestî mey krdîn
Be machî lêwî musteGnî le enwa3y mezey krdîn
Traza bendî suxmey allî gulnarî be ahî mn
Kechî destî le ser dana, le seyrî baGî bey krdîn
Be hewrî perchemu ebro, ruxu zulfî ke daposî
Le shewqî ru’yetî bedrî hîlalî yek shewey krdîn*

[Nari 2003: 95]

³ Although I do not know where Serdar heard this story, it appears in the *Masnawi Ma’anavi* by Jalal al-Din Rumi, Book I: 3727ff (Nicholson 1926).

By the squinting of her black, intoxicated eyes, she intoxicated us
With a kiss from her abundant lips, she took us from an array of tastes
Her shirt opened upon a floral red when I sighed “Ah”
But she covered it with her hand, and denied us the sight of her garden of quince
With the clouds of her locks and eyebrows, she hid her face and cheeks
She took from us the shining splendor of that waxing crescent moon

Upon this recitation, I insisted that he repeat it slowly for me to copy down. I told him the poem was beautiful and he went on to name another poet he found beautiful, Omer Khayyam. Omer Khayyam was remarkable, Serdar said, because he “criticizes God” (*rexne le xwa egrê*). He brought the example of a poem that he did not recite but described its theme: Why would God create beauty just in order to destroy it? Sensitive humans, even when they’re drunk, are not so cruel—they don’t even break the glass they drink from! The poem to which he referred, according to the popular Kurdish translation by Hejar that Serdar recited to me on another occasion, is as follows:

Serxosh dilî naye piyaleyêk bishkênê
Her tozê le baru rêku pêk binwênê
Xwa ew hemu lashe nask u law chake
*Bo chî rêkî exa w le daxî kêy erzênî?*⁴

A drunk hasn’t the heart to shatter his glass
Even if he suffers a little, he goes straight to sleep.
Oh God, all those delicate figures, those beautiful youth,
Why destroy them, for the sake of whose grief do you have them rot?

After mentioning this poem, he returned to the poem by Nari, connecting it to Khayyam’s poem: When Nari in the first poem says *zulf* (down on the cheek), what he means by that is human beauty. Why shouldn’t we enjoy the beauty of humans (*bo chî chêj lê cwanî insane nebînîn*)?⁵ Then he pointed out that when Nari says *mest*, he doesn’t just mean

⁴ Hejar p. 47.

⁵ Here Serdar indicated beauty in a sense that was not necessarily erotic. But that the eroticism of beauty encompassed more of humanity than simply its young females was clear to me on several occasions. For example, once when walking through the bazaar Serdar opened up the vista of that erotic tension that often appears in the bazaar (where men and women often trade or flee from flirtatious glances) when he said

drunken intoxication (*serxoshî*), but he means the imagination (*xeyal*) formed in such intoxication (*ew xeyale ke drust ebêt le serxoshî*). As he said this, he held his hand out in front of him, raised to his shoulders, with his fingers half-curved as if holding something in his hands that was too big to wrap his fingers around, he wiggled his head back and forth, raised his eyebrows and let his eyes look to the sky. Then he commented on the poem more generally and said:

*Because we aren't free, this [i.e., this kind of poetry] suits our condition.
When we see someone,
we miss them,
we begin remembering them.*

—and here he made the same gestures he made when describing *mest*. That my notes stop here suggests to me that our conversation changed tracks: either we encountered some acquaintance or became busy with the bazaar, or for some reason we were moved on to talk about other things.

It was not until I began poring over my field notes years later that I realized how Serdar's recitation of this poem was in fact part of his answer to my query about his ethical orientation. He had described it as a "natural system," but the mode of description was not a summary of a normative discourse that existed beyond Serdar's invocation of it. It was rather in the mode of an improvisation, in which the term *natural system* was meant to be a placeholder, perhaps akin to what Sells called the *nonreligious* or to what I prefer to call *otherwise*.⁶

matter-of-factly, "I like ass." I asked him mockingly, "Can't you think of anything other than girls?" To which he replied, "Who said anything about girls? I said I like ass. Boys got it, too."

⁶ One may also hear in Serdar's expression a resonance with ongoing debates among Muslim theologians about the relation of "natural law" of human nature known as *fitra* and the "revealed law" of the *shari'a*. According to Frank Griffel's (2007) outline of one such debate, the consensus is that whatever their relation, there is no established methodology for moving from the *fitra* to moral principles of right action—only the *shari'a* reveals this. Without knowing the extent or context in which Serdar might have engaged these debates, the resonance here suggests that we consider them as a "note" on the "scale" in which we

But embarking upon the description of this system, two key figures rise to the center of Serdar's account. First, Imam Ali is invoked. Though at first blush it may seem quite common that a Muslim invoke a pious companion of the Prophet in a description of his ethical orientation, Serdar's invocation of Imam Ali is considerably more complex, and in fact appears less as an endorsement of the Prophet's pious precedent than as an invocation of a figure who is not only its archetypical representative but also possibly its subversive archenemy. Indeed, Serdar's love for Imam Ali seems to span the length of an arc or tendency that cuts across orthodoxy and heresy. On one end of that arc, Sunni Muslims in Kurdistan are enjoined to passionate attachments to Imam Ali as a Companion of the Prophet and the Fourth Commander of the Faithful. But at the other end of the arc is a heretical turn where love of Imam Ali supersedes love of the Prophet. In Iraqi Kurdistan, this is generally associated with Shi'ism, and this heretical tendency was appealing to Serdar. When I later followed up on his interest in Imam Ali by procuring a collection of Imam Ali's sayings in Arabic and reading it together with him, Serdar was disappointed in the book's commentary and quipped, "Sunnis don't know anything, you have to go to the Shi'a to learn about Imam Ali."⁷ Serdar often showed Imam Ali as one who outdoes the Prophet in some sense, and he cited with fascination the doctrine (which he attributed to some Shi'a) that Prophethood was actually sent to Imam Ali through the angel Gabriel but Muhammad had stolen the office. But in

hear Serdar's voice (more on this below). What he seems to say fairly clearly is that he sees a fundamental difference between the "natural system" of which he speaks and any "system" that considers *shari'a* as congruent with natural law.

⁷ When I asked Serdar about the sources of his understanding of Imam Ali, he mentioned a small booklet that had been in common circulation during his childhood that had translated many sayings from Nahj al-Bulagha into Kurdish. (I was unable to procure this booklet.) As for the sources of his understanding of the Shia doctrines of Imam Ali, I am left to hazard my own guesses: television broadcasting in Arabic in which Shia *ulama* explained those teachings, and perhaps the reports by Sunni *ulama* that name and explain Shia doctrines with the purpose of refuting them as heretical.

Serdar's descriptions, the particular genius of Imam Ali is not necessarily that he provides a teaching that is *better* than the teaching of the prophet, but that his words shed a *different* light on virtuous living. Serdar doesn't state the superiority of Imam Ali to the Prophet in declaratory language. But the point is that the sayings of Imam Ali pierce him in a way that the teachings of the Prophet fail to do. And it is partly Imam Ali's vulnerability—to be affected enough by the humanness of his enemy to keep from killing him—that made him exemplary of a natural system as a placeholder for the otherwise to which Serdar strives.

Second, Serdar recited Nari's poem. The poem itself is quite well known in Kurdistan and the circumstances of its composition are commonly recounted upon its mention, though Serdar did not mention it on this occasion. The poets Nari and Tayer Beg were sitting together in their opulent garden when they saw a beautiful Jewish girl who became the inspiration for this poem. The authorial voice of the poem shows its plurality in its end rhyme that conjugates the verb *kirdin* in the first person plural as the indirect object (*kirdîn*). This plural subject is affected in several modes proper to the genre of the love poem at the turn of the 20th century in Kurdistan. Being love-struck is like intoxication; the girl's lips, like the lips of Christ, bear the promise of restoring life, but she has no intention of sparing her lovers from death, nor of giving them more than a passing glimpse of her beauty.

Such a description of a lover's encounter with the beloved is suffused with aspects of the mystic's encounter with the divine, such as the ebb and flow of states or conditions (*hal*) of witnessing divine unity that alternate between "union" and "separation," or the inseparability of the beauty of the divine manifested as kindness and

grace and the majesty of the divine manifested as cruelty and wrath. But I want to draw out a different aspect of the poem that Serdar privileged in his short commentary. This was a particular sensibility that echoes across the poet's encounter with the beloved and the event of Serdar's recitation: the capacity, or vulnerability, to be pierced by love or beauty. "Us" is the object that is affected by a beauty that appears only fleetingly, and with whom the futility of hope for *legal* union is accentuated by religious difference. While there is no legal basis in the relevant juridical schools of Hanafi or Shafi'i *fiqh* to prevent the contraction of marriage between a Muslim man and a Jewish woman (cf. Ali 2006, Friedmann 2003), the supposition that such a marriage would be difficult to carry out is what gives the poem an additional force. Encountering an impossible love, the Muslim poets surrender to the condition of being love-struck.

It was this vulnerability that produced in the poet what Serdar calls an imagination that is not simple intoxication, but a condition of clairvoyance in which thought and memory and sense perception comeingle. *We can see beauty*, the poet seems to say. *It can pierce us, it can bring us to life, or deliver us to death. Love can strike us at any moment.* Serdar's recitation of these beautifully rhyming couplets, then, may also be heard as an announcement of his own vulnerability and characteristic of the otherwise toward which Serdar gestured. Indeed this sensibility resonates with the anecdote about Imam Ali and the allusion to the poem by Khayyam. Is it not because Imam Ali is possessed of the clairvoyance to love his enemy and find beauty in him that Serdar loves him? And isn't it Khayyam's capacity to see the beauty in humans that leads him to despair of the God who would assign them to perdition?

While these notions of clairvoyance and vulnerability to beauty resonate strongly with some aspects of a mystical theology, it is a resonation across a very important difference: that Serdar was here describing an ethical orientation meant to stand in *contrast* to the pious striving exemplified by his brother. Rather than identifying the goals of his "natural system," the poems and anecdotes provide part of the *texture* through which that system becomes palpable to the ear, to the eye, and to the imagination. It is not simply "Sunni Islam in Kurdistan," generally speaking, against which his vision emerges, but its embodiment in his brother's pious striving. His brother had spoken in the genre of *nasîha*, or moral advice, when beseeching Serdar to pray. But Serdar carefully avoids informing his brother of the status of his "belief" and avoids altogether making claims about an ethical orientation. Serdar does not say but implies that he does not have belief, but paradoxically his brother does not mistake him for someone he is not by thinking that Serdar does have belief. Some attention to the Kurdish grammar of this phrase may help to clarify this matter. The verb *pê wa bun*, might be translated as "he thinks," but in this case, "it seems to him"⁸ is more accurate since the verb is both transitive and passive: it names his brother as the one *to whom the seeming is given*, but it does not name the one *who gives it so to seem*. In other words, Kurdish grammar here encourages us to consider the sense in which his brother is given to think something, but it does not make of Serdar an active subject who *gives* his brother to think something.

By not making a convincing disavowal of Islam before his brother, Serdar allows his brother to continue in a certain misperception. In such a delicate situation, his brother's regarding Serdar as if his relation to Islam was different only in degree, and not in kind, from his brother's relation to Islam, is a condition in which the two men partake

⁸ Kurdish pronouns are not gendered.

together. It allows his brother the opportunity to demonstrate care by advising him to pray, and it frees Serdar from the obligation to either reveal the condition of his belief, or, what would amount to a very different but also burdensome thing, to conceal it. Both brothers carry on in the subjunctive modality of “as if”—*as if* Serdar were a believing Muslim.

We shall learn more about the texture of that relationship shortly but for the moment I want to emphasize that Serdar’s invocation of Sufi love poetry in his conversation with me was a part of his allusion toward an ethical orientation that is *otherwise than dîndar*. I say “otherwise than *dîndar*” as a way of summarizing those gestures that turn away from the piety exemplified by his brother, leaving open and undetermined what they are a turn toward. Even if the “natural system” was one way of describing that turning, it did not indicate a complete system or a final arrival. I say allusion because the poem was meant to be a preliminary, improvisatory description of a kind of vulnerability toward the world.

Sheikh San’an and Majnun: An Impossible Desire

On one occasion early in the winter of 2008, Serdar and I met for a walk near *Baxi Gishti*, the Public Park just beside the main bazaar in Suleimani, across the street from the Palace Hotel. My mood that day betrayed my sorrows in love. Once I implied that my sorrows belonged in the region of romantic love, he didn’t inquire after the details of my circumstance. Though his curiosity must have been roused, to indulge it would have forced me into either revelation or concealment. So I took it as his way of caring when he casually suggested a distraction by gazing at the girls who walked by as we sat on the park bench. “That will be no help,” I said inconsolably, revealing myself despite myself.

Quietly he sighed “Ehhh.” Then he said, “It’s true, when you’re in love (*ke tushî ‘ishyq buyt*) the others are all nothing. I’m the same way, you know. Don’t misunderstand: it’s true I like [looking at] girls, but just as something beautiful in the world. I cannot betray my wife (*Egîne natwanm xeyanet le jnm bkem*). Even if I wanted to, I cannot do it. I love Sana a lot.” Though he did not specify what he meant by “betray,” we were both familiar enough with the type of relationship in question. That kind of relationship—usually with an unmarried female, involving secret meetings, cell phone conversations, text messages, and possibly also sexual contact—was a common topic of conversation among our male acquaintances. The vocabulary for such relations was imprecise (*kch*, girl; *brader* or *rafîq*, friend; *denk*, girlfriend; or the English *girlfrënd* were commonly used), and my sense was often confirmed that people only half believed the stories. But as concerns the event of their telling, perhaps the referential truth of the stories was secondary to their role in creating intimate relations between males who celebrate stories of extra-marital liaisons with females. So when Serdar disowned the prospect of procuring such a relationship, implying that his enjoyment of girls was limited only to gazing, and invoking his love for his wife, he seemed to say that he was bound to an idea and affect of love (*‘ishq*) that admits of only one Beloved. As I shared my grievous state with him he shared with me something about his love. Although much was left unsaid, we had not forced one another into concealment.

Serdar frequently made such passionate confessions about his love. He often praised his wife’s beauty, her cooking, her intelligence, and spoke of his inability to live without her. Though not uncommon among newlywed men of my acquaintance in Suleimani, I had rarely heard such unabashed praise from men who had been married for

more than ten years, with children, as Serdar had. It was much more common for men of that age cohort to refer to their spouses as *malewe*, a kind of objectification of the beloved as a home.⁹ But Serdar always used her name, Sana, when he spoke to me.

On the handful of occasions when I did visit him at his home—an inexpensive rental with a neglectful landlord in one of Suleimani's older neighborhoods—I saw various pleasures in their relationships: he flirted with his wife by telling me, "I'm glad you're here because my wife never makes such good food just for me"; his wife asked me if I thought the newly remodeled kitchen looked good, and so set up an opportunity to boast about Serdar's craftsmanship.; his sons dangled around his neck, hugging and kissing him, begging him for an exception to the rule that they not ride their bikes in the alley after dinner; all of us laughed as Serdar clumsily mounted a bike that was far too small for him. In a gesture of hospitality, his wife even suggested that Serdar and I drink there at the house rather than go to the bars where everything is overpriced, where the food is dirty and tasteless, and where scenes of violence between drunks are inevitable. This gesture of hospitality was all the more remarkable given that his wife was a pious Muslim. She dutifully kept the fast and prayed regularly, and wore a headscarf (*lêchik*) during Ramazan. I recall the first time I saw Sana with a headscarf during Ramazan, 2008. She asked me if I was surprised to see her in the headscarf and explained why she wears it during Ramazan and how fasting is required of all Muslims during this time. In the course of the conversation, she mentioned her husband's non-observance in common

⁹ Along with the sense of objectification emphasized by Fischer-Tahir (2009), it is also important to consider the proximity of one of this term's derivatives—*malekem*—which was often used by men and women referring to their spouse or lover as "my home," not only in the sense of "what belongs to me," but also in the sense of "what is precious to me" or perhaps "where I belong."

terms: *gwê nayet*, he doesn't pay attention, doesn't listen, doesn't even lend an ear. This was a very subtle way of rendering a stark religious difference.

The pleasures Serdar found beyond his home, his family, and his habit of gazing (*seyr krden*), were also clear in other interactions, one of which shall be the focus of analysis here. Once we met by chance in the bazaar and spoke for a few minutes. His first words to me were, *Chonît lem sharey bêaxlaq?*, which I might translate as, "How are you getting by in this immoral city?" I chuckled at his dry humor, which had pre-empted my usual question about how he was doing by indicating that he was suffering in some way from the immorality of the city. Soon he answered my query about where he was going by mentioning the Palace Hotel, which was for many years the tallest building in Suleimani, and less than a hundred meters from where we stood. "I'm going to Palace. I'm going to throw myself down [from the top]." I laughed again and asked him what had inspired this decision. He answered that he had just "loved a girl" (or *fallen in love* as the English idiom would have it). Recalling the way he had expressed his love for his wife and the impossibility of other liaisons, I was surprised and asked him whether it wasn't shameful, (*'ayb niye?*). In retrospect, I suppose my tone of voice sounded like one of rebuttal or reproof (*serzanisht*, one might say in Kurdish), even if it was full of hesitation and uncertainty. His reply was quick and cool, with a hint of sarcasm. "What should I do, become a Christian?" I didn't understand then what I now perceive as a kind of joke, and when he saw my confusion he explained by saying, "Muslims can have four wives, only Jesus forbade that (*qedexye krduwe*)."

The joke took me by surprise on two accounts. First, I was surprised by how perfectly possible it suddenly seemed to me that Serdar marry a second wife.¹⁰ I suspected that I had misunderstood him on the previous occasion: either he had not disowned the fantasy of extra-marital liaisons beyond gazing and he had only disowned something else (that was still unclear to me), or else he had spoken in a way that could not be taken seriously or straightforwardly. Perhaps the category of *xeyanet* (betrayal) did not, after all, include the condition of being love-struck and making advances on such an occasion. The second reason for my surprise was the way religious difference appeared here. His remark about Jesus' forbidding of polygamy sounded like a kind of ironic bragging about the adventures afforded by being a Muslim rather than a Christian, while much of Serdar's speech about his status as a Muslim bore the tone of a regretful reconciliation to fate.

Serdar then told the story of his encounter. He was at the bus stop, and he saw a beautiful girl with a ring on her finger. He asked her why she had married an ugly man, and why she worked so hard to protect her honor.¹¹ In turn, she asked how he knew that her husband was not good looking, and he said, "It's like this in our country: a beautiful girl doesn't marry a handsome boy, she marries for money." I told him in a tone of protest that it would break the heart of his wife, since she would surely be disappointed to hear him talk of love for another woman. Whether my protest appeared to Serdar as a typically Christian judgment, or as a projection of my own broken heart onto his wife, or

¹⁰ Although the Parliament of the Kurdistan Regional Government had recently passed several resolutions to increase restrictions on polygamy, it was still commonly practiced in Kurdistan. But the fantasy of a second wife is here paradoxically related to the law, since in Serdar's speech a second wife seems in fact to stand in for an extra-marital liaison.

¹¹ It remains unclear to me what he meant by this phrase. Perhaps she was veiled, perhaps she rebuffed his attempts to converse with her, perhaps not.

something else, only he can say. But he replied in a tone of voice that was frank and sober, “Love? There is no such thing in this country” (*‘ishq? Shtî wa wejudî niye lem welate*). The space of our encounter that day—his dream-like condition of being love-stuck and strikingly witty combined with my confusion and reproof—led him to such a declaration about his world.

Though at the time I was deaf to the subtlety of allusion in Serdar’s question, “What should I do, become a Christian?”, the question cites a Kurdish couplet without reciting it. It is precisely the kind of allusion that Mudarris (1991) identifies as one of the techniques of poetic composition in the classical milieu, *talmih*: “within your own speech you make an allusion to an event or a poem or a proverb” (64). With a better understanding of the trope in that couplet, we may be better able to listen to Serdar:

*Legel destî Mela rê nakawêt zunnarî zulfî yar
Weku (Shêx), ixtiyarî mezhebî tirsî nakem, ch bkem?*

With the (begging) hands of the Mella, there is no meeting with the *zunnar* of the beloved’s locks,
Unless like the Sheikh I chose the sect of Christians, what can I do?

The couplet is from a longer poem by Mahwy, and is one of the most frequently memorized couplets of classical poetry in contemporary Suleimani. Serdar recited it to me on several other occasions and it is clear that the slight grammatical rephrasing of his question in our conversation referred to this couplet. The couplet indexes the story of Sheikh San’an, which is related most famously in Farid Al-Din ‘Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* (*Mentiq Al-Tayr*), but usually recounted in Suleimani without acknowledging ‘Attar. In brief, the tale is this: a learned Sheikh has a dream that prompts him to travel with a retinue of his disciples to “Rum.” On the path, he falls in love with a girl whose Christianity is marked by her wearing of the belt called *zunnar* (required of non-Muslims

living under Islamic governance, this symbol of subjugation has become a sign of Christian virtue in much Persianate poetry, a Christian virtue that attracts the most pious Muslims [Lewis 2009]). The Sheikh's beloved requires him to forsake Islam ('Attar's version specifies four means of this disavowal: drinking wine, bowing before an image, burning the Qur'an, and disclaiming his faith [p.64]). The Sheikh accepts her condition and soon all his disciples have abandoned him, but the Christian girl accepts him. Most accounts of the tale in contemporary Suleimani end there. But I have heard some people mention that there is another version of the story. While they held this to be the proper version of the story, they said that the other version "Islamicizes" (*Islami krdn*) the story. That version is in fact found in 'Attar, and adds the conclusion that the Sheikh repents, renounces Christianity and departs with his disciples (who had returned to urge him to forsake his infidelity) to return to Mecca—only to realize along the way that his Beloved “knocks at Religion's door” (74)—that is, she desires to become Muslim—and she does so in his presence before breathing her last. As is often claimed in Suleimani, it is only they who tried to make the story Islamic by inventing a return to Islam, but the force of the story lies in the Sheikh's having loved so truly that he gave up Islam and became a Christian.

The story presumes two ideas and draws much of its force from the paradoxical relationship it establishes between them. First, love cannot flourish between two persons of different religious orientations. In this case, love between a Muslim Sheikh and a Christian girl can only be realized if the former forsakes his religion. But at the same

time, the tale celebrates the flourishing of that love when the Sheikh is able to *cover*¹² his religion with a love that is neither Christian nor Muslim. The paradox, then, is that if love encompasses this difference, it cannot sustain it. In both versions of the story, the lovers are united only on the condition of transforming—and so sharing—a religious orientation.

In Mahwy's couplet, the "I" of the poem, an educated *Mella*, finds himself hopelessly in love with a Christian and asks, *If I don't become like Sheikh Sana'an and become a Christian for the sake of my love, what else could I do?* Serdar's words echo this phrase precisely. *Ch bkem, bbime masîhî?* "What should I do, become a Christian?" In an attempt to understand the sense of his question, we could render it in at least two ways: *Is my love for Sana such that I'd become a Christian for her?* Or, *Should my love for Sana be so Christian that I cannot love another also?* The question is rhetorical in the sense that its primary effect is to prompt me to question the doubt I cast upon Serdar through my reproof. It is not that Serdar should become Christian for love, or that his love should become Christian. But the force of the question draws from the idea that the shape or form of one's spiritual aspiration be reshaped by love. Serdar means to say this time that his love for Sana is not like *that*. It is not a matter of translating expressions of transcendent love into everyday life, but living in the shadow of the impossibility of such translation. Who could love in such a way? But who could stop imagining such a love? The madness and desperation sometimes occasioned by this paradox, joined with the madness and desperation that is so often characteristic of being love-struck, is perhaps what is expressed in Serdar's impulse to throw himself from the top of the Palace Hotel.

¹² The etymology of *kufar* (Ar.), which is often translated as "infidelity," shows its relation to the verb *kafara* (Ar.) which means *to cover*, and has been interpreted as "covering" in the sense of denying the facts of God's Oneness and his Generosity.

His declaration that "there is no such thing as love in this country" can be understood in a variety of ways. One could suppose that he meant to single out Kurdistan as unlike Europe or America. Or one might suppose that he spoke disparagingly of Kurdistan's present, as if love had existed there but does not any more. Or maybe he meant to withdraw the claim that his encounter with the girl resembled *'ishq* in any way. But without excluding these possibilities, we may also consider the archive of poetic expressions that was available to him in forms *other* than a couplet that is memorized and kept ready at hand. The following anecdote may provide insight. It is related that a man had a dream in which he saw Majnun and asked him, "What has God done to you?" Majnun answered, "He pardoned me and set me as an argument against all those who claim love" (al-Qushayri: 329). Majnun, the famous Arab lover whose love for Layla led him to forsake all honor in his madness, is one of the most prominent figures in much speech about romantic love in Kurdistan—be it in the register of classical poetry or in everyday conversation. Indeed, the figure of Majnun is evoked in Serdar's speech through themes of the concern for "honor" trumping passionate love and the suicidal impulse. So if Serdar speaks from within the realm of a mystical language of eros, it behooves our analysis to seek out not only the explicit citations in his speech, but also those references that elude citation. The anecdote above, from the *Epistle on Sufism* composed in Arabic and attributed to Abdul Qasim al-Qushayri in the 11th century, is one such reference. Taking this note as a reference point in the scale, as it were, we can hear the tune of Serdar's speech more clearly: his case for *'ishq* is weak when he argues with Majnun.

Religious difference is here not only a question of being Christian or being Muslim. Those orientations in fact refract different ways of being Muslim—a difference that Sana pointed up in contrasting her wearing of a headscarf with Serdar's "not lending an ear." But the sense of Serdar's own religious orientation involved an ethical striving I have called a *becoming otherwise*, whose subtle and fine-tuned nature is apparent in the relation to his brother described above.

Returning to Sells' question about why the best-loved poetry is that in which the beloved is ambiguous, let us formulate a response for Serdar's case. It will not suffice to say simply that erotic poetry expresses Serdar's ethical becoming otherwise while Ibn Arabi's is strictly grounded in pietistic Muslim practices. As the first section of this chapter has shown, the force of mystical language depends as much on the proximity of the two kinds of aspiration as it does on their divergence. The more important distinction arises when we consider *how* poetry comes to express moral aspiration. Here it is not because a kind of aspiration has been prescribed and adopted but cannot be completely described. Rather, it is because the trajectory of moral aspiration is itself not yet known and only partially indicated. The continual transfiguration of mystical language (exemplified by Ibn Arabi) is part of what equips the genre of erotic poetry with a sense of an ongoing aspiration. But when Serdar invokes the figures of Sheikh San'an and Majnun, it is not their striving along the given path to knowledge of God and proper Muslim living that Serdar draws upon. It is rather the moments of rupture when Majnun's madness overtakes him, and Sheikh San'an's love overcomes his commitment to Islam. If he upholds them as models of love he also admits the impossibility of bringing that model into everyday life.

Qur'an Audition and the Persistence of Desire

To think more carefully about the texture of Serdar's relationship to his brother, I'll describe parts of conversation that Serdar and I shared at a bar one Thursday night late in the Summer of 2008, just a few days after the beginning of Ramazan. We had been sitting for a while when the following dialogue took place, which I typed up later in the evening, drawing from my hastily written notes and my memory. The mood was relaxed and conversation flowed freely. Late in the evening, he mentioned that his son had told him that he wants to fast. When I asked why, he answered that since the boy sees his uncle and everyone around him fasting, he wants to fast. Serdar continued:

And because my brother told him, "You should fast," and, "God will see it," and those things.

I asked, "Does your brother tell you that you should fast?"

No, he doesn't tell me that. But he told my son in a sneaky way (be dzyewe).

"Why? Do you see this as pointing to your disagreement in that aspect, or do you think of him as respecting you?"

*No, it is because he respects me.
He loves me a lot, you know.
When I [do some work on the house], he comes and does the work of a day laborer (krêkar) on the house.
I don't even tell him, but he does it.
And when he gets angry, later he'll come back and say, "I beg your pardon, forgive me" (daway lê burdn ekem, bmbure).*

I asked, "But you felt like he told your son in a sneaky way (be dizîyewe)?"

I mean, we can say that without my being aware of it, he told him these things.

"So what did you tell him (the son)?"

I told him that still he is young, that he is thin, and he needs to take care of his health. [That was all I could say,] because I can't tell him not to fast.

“Why?”

Because if I tell him not to fast, these parties¹³ will arrest me.

[I gave him a look of surprise]

Sure, supposedly they are secular and everything, but at the root, at the very base of them, these parties are based on Islam. And there are laws about it. For example, if I told my wife, "Don't fast," she would immediately summon me to court and divorce me. It's like that in this country. The parties are with them [i.e., the Islamists].

“That's really a law?”

Yeah, ask Dilshad [a mutual acquaintance of ours and a practicing lawyer], or better than that, ask Rebin who was a lawyer a long time ago for Dilshad. He knows it all. There are laws for everything.

The conversation was sidetracked as we tried to figure out when and how I had met

Dilshad. Later Serdar described an evening of drinking he had shared with a friend and

then he said something like this:

Then that night I went home, and I was watching TV.

I like these Islamic channels.

I watch them all the time, and sometimes I'll call my brother and tell him to watch something that is on.

That night, this guy was reading the Qur'an, and he was crying.

It was amazing ('acîb), his voice was just amazing.

[Here he made a sound by smacking his lips to emphasize how impressive the reading was].

“Do you really enjoy listening to those things?” (I asked this to clarify that the mode of his enjoyment was closer to sincere than ironic.)

Yeah, because this isn't a religions thing, it is a human thing. I started crying, too. I listened to this, and I started to cry. And so I called up my brother and told him to watch it.

¹³ Serdar here referred metonymically to the Kurdistan Regional Government. The PUK and KDP are the two political parties that had controlled the Kurdistan Regional Government since its inception in 1992. That law and justice were left to the hands of the whims of political parties and not invested in an autonomous judiciary system was a common critique of the Kurdistan Regional Government. That the whims of these parties were determined by Islamists was a common critique of these parties' claims to be "secular."

This interaction provides much insight into the texture of both the threats and promises that arise in this family given the differing religious orientations. Serdar here acknowledged the possible boundaries of his wife's desire to live with him as her husband. Furthermore, Serdar understood his words to his wife about fasting as belonging within a wider network where they could be taken and used against him. Even if he did not intend to terminate his marriage or to prevent her from fasting, and even if she did not so take his words, they could be taken up and used as evidence to issue a divorce against their will. (This was precisely what happened to Nasr Abu Zayd [Hirschkind 1996], and the spectre of similar events looms large in Serdar's imagination.) Thus on the one hand his marriage is a kind of gamble against the chance that desire itself might fail them altogether in the face of politically motivated legal interventions. But on the other hand, his marriage is also a gamble that his wife not find herself up against the limits of her desire to live with him. In this sense, letting loose his tongue and frankly advising her would be tantamount to establishing the limit of his own desire. Holding his tongue, then, was one condition of enabling a future. This is another aspect of the texture of desire, which is not predicated on the transcendence of the beloved with whom one can never attain union or properly describe, but on the simple willingness to go on in the face of intractable religious difference, and the promise of a future together.

Our conversation that evening turned on another kind of promise, also enacted in the face of the threat of the end of desire. When Serdar's brother advised Serdar's young son to fast, the specter of the ending of desire seemed to appear yet again. We would be remiss to try to locate a cause for Serdar's tears either in his secret attachment to Islam or as a displacement of the painful aspects of the relationship with his brother. But the fact

of his crying echoes his anecdotes of Imam Ali in the sense that it takes up a tendency that runs from orthodoxy to heresy. That the Qur'an inspires tears in a human being, and in a Muslim in particular, is axiomatic to orthodoxy in Kurdistan. (I return to this theme below in Chapter Three.) But when Serdar says that it is "not a religious thing" but "a human thing," he suggests that the Qur'an be considered in some light other than its status as divine revelation. Perhaps it makes sense given his notion of a natural system, in which the body responds to the beauty of the Qur'an in the same that the body responds to other beauties. In this case his own embodied response to the beauty of the Qur'an was accentuated by the fact that he was drunk at the time. In this sense his crying demonstrates the vulnerability we discerned in his previous invocations of Imam Ali and Nari's poetry. The force of his crying must also be considered in light of the attachment it allowed him to make in his own life by calling his brother on the phone. Sharing that pleasure with his brother is saturated with the tension of his brother's advice to his son. Serdar's brother knew that he should conceal that advice to his nephew since advising the boy in the presence of his father would give cause for offense. But when Serdar finds himself pierced by the beauty of the Qur'an, he seizes the chance to share it with his brother. Such sharing does not so much prove a love that will transcend religious difference, but enacts a love that strives to bear up that difference. The texture of the desire that animates his relation to his brother lies in the small gestures of sharing a beauty that brings one to tears.

Mahwy: "God becomes a lover"

Following up on Serdar's interest in Khayyam, I made an appointment with Serdar to sit and discuss Khayyam one evening at a bar. We spent some time reading Khayyam and talking about the poems, letting the conversation wander as conversations do. At a certain point when he picked up the book to find another poem of some interest, he closed it and said that in fact he loved Mahwy more than Khayyam. Another of Kurdistan's accomplished poets of the 19th century, Mahwy was regarded by many as the peak of beauty in Sufi poetic expression in Sorani Kurdish. When I asked why, he replied, "Because Mahwy talks about *'ishq*, and he talks about it at the level of humans, of God, and of society." After a pause, he brought an illustration. "For example, he has one poem that says 'if someone has poor conduct, I retreat from him.' I hide myself from him. That's it. That's important, man!" Moved by what he said, I picked up the diwan of Mahwy that I happened to have in my bag and read to him the poem that I had just studied that day. Serdar then picked up the diwan and read the rest of the poem quietly to himself and then said:

*When I read this, I feel that I have been lazy.
I should have memorized some of this.
I should have read it more carefully.
Would that I had been better, or else that I had not been at all! (hebu nebumaye,
yaxud bashbumaye)*

In the conversation that followed, he said:

In humans, there is a continual striving (renc): it is a kind of interrogation (lê prsînewe) that is always happening. You ask yourself every night what you did today, what was good and what was bad. Not necessarily on moral things, but on normal things, every day things: buying and selling and talking to friends. I'm not talking about killing people or stealing, or those things . . . no, not those things that . . . we can say . . . everyone has agreed on: everyone says you shouldn't do those things, and that's nothing; we won't take account of that. But there are other things that you always ask yourself. And why is Mahwy

important? Because he deepens things. He sees into the depth of things, and in just two words, he gives it to you, and you can think about it, and you can go into the depth of things with those words.

He then he described teaching himself art as an example of this:

It is like art: I didn't study it at the university. No one taught me how to do it, but I did it myself. I taught myself. I took up a corner [here he adopted the same idiom as Mahwy's taking up/giving up the corner of tariqet], and I learned it. Now I have a friend who wants to make art. And she can, but she gets lazy. All of us are like that, really. But she says to me that she wants me to ask her about it and bother her about it, so I ask her. She says she has no canvas. I buy a canvas and I put it at her doorstep. She says she has no paints, I give her paints. She says she has no room, I tell her all you need is a corner. Finally she says that she is afraid it will be ugly. So in the end, it is that: she is afraid of what people will think. But you know why I love Ahmed [an artist and a mutual acquaintance of ours]? This week, he opened up a few exhibitions, and he is working on a few more. He took me to his room and he showed me his work, and I told him what I thought. I said, "I can see you are working on this, but here is this problem, and there you have that problem." And you know what he did? He got a notebook and he wrote it all down. I said I hope it doesn't upset you that I say these things, and he said, "Why would it upset me? It pleases me." This is how it works: self-interrogation (xo lê prsînewe).

Then, more soberly, he turned to the topic of less admirable friends:

But you should also know this: In this country, there is a kind of friend who you will find everywhere who will simply tell you that you are doing good work, [He'll say,] "Good work!" (dest xosh) He tells you this just because he wants to spend an evening with you, and pass the time.

My notes indicate how much is missing them by saying only, "We mused on the bitterness together for a minute, and on bad friendships." I mused on my own lost friendships at that time and I did not conceal my sorrow. Neither did he conceal his sorrows. I recall him saying that some friends just disappear and never call again. Others take your money and disappear. We ran through a long list of shortcomings and when we finally came to rest, it was as if to survey all the failures friendships are capable of. He then said reflectively:

*This world. . . . That's how Mahwy comes about (boye Mahwy drust ebê):
God becomes a lover, a lover becomes God. . . . You get mixed up. . . .
(Xwa ebête 3ashq, 3ashq ebête Xwa. . . . Lêt têk echê. . . .)*

Though these last words are the most important for our analysis, I have quoted this conversation at length since Serdar here articulates the sense in which the passionate love poetry of Mahwy articulates moral striving: just “two words” from Mahwy allow you to “go into the depth of things,” he says, and when he sighs after reading a line and says, “Would that I had been better or else that I had not been at all,” the depth and breadth of this “better” are matched by its ambiguity. Here again we encounter that ethical sensibility that is open-ended, not captured by a creed or a system but alluded to in poetry. The last of his expressions is a claim about the kind of experience from which he understands Mahwy to emerge. Though he had noted that Mahwy’s discussions of passionate love pertain to God, to humans (i.e., to passionate love between human relations), and to society (i.e., to the wider network of relations in which any passionate love is embedded), his final claim is that Mahwy’s poetry emerges from the same world in which Serdar lives. That was a world constituted in part by embeddedness in the human relations vulnerable to failures of various kinds, if also to enduring pleasures and satisfaction. Serdar drew upon love poetry and mystical language to show and express a kind of moral striving when he explained how “God becomes a lover, and a lover becomes God.” The availability of these concepts and expression, he claims, comes from *this* world, from the shifting and failing of human relations. In relations with his friends, his wife, and his brother, he finds himself vulnerable to such shifting and failing, where desire is not guaranteed and does not itself guarantee a future. So to return to Sells’s question with which this chapter began, we can see that Serdar’s attraction to Sufi poetry

is not grounded in the ambiguity of the Beloved as either divine or human, nor in an abstract movement of distance and proximity. What animates that poetry for him is the Lover's learning to live with others in a world saturated by failures. Lovers of God such as Mahwy are always learning how to get by when their desire will fail them, and Serdar is learning the same in his family. It is the more ordinary task of renewing desire for a future together that provides the texture within which love poetry's infinity of desire finds traction.

CHAPTER TWO

“There was no fasting in Zoroastrianism”: A Daughter Learns Beauty

A Method for Beauty

A primary task of this chapter is to develop a method for studying beauty by tracing its appearance in everyday life. How do concepts of beauty animate daily life and relations with the self, the divine, and the community? The daily life that is the focus of inquiry here is of a poet in Kurdistan whom I shall call Pexshan. Born into a Muslim family around mid-century, she described her mother and father as *dîndar*, or relatively pious Muslims (see Chapter One), who were eager to practice their faith as well as pass it on to their children. But as we shall come to see, Pexshan’s inheritance of Islam is a complicated matter, since although she does claim a certain kind of *îman* (faith), she never described herself as *dîndar* and often made gestures of disavowal or refusal of Islam as *dîn* (religion). This chapter takes up the theme of beauty as it emerged in a series of conversations that bear the texture of that complicated inheritance. In learning about the kinds of relations Pexshan forges and discovers with her self, her kin, and her community, we shall also learn about the work of beauty in enabling those relations.

Existing studies of beauty largely proceed by means of dialogue with the concepts of beauty and the field of aesthetics as it emerged through the major Enlightenment traditions of western Europe. Through dialogue with that tradition, scholars have sought to de-center the assumptions of the aesthetic theory whose contours were synthesized by Kant (Kant 2000; cf. Crawford 1974). Thus John Dewey has argued that aesthetic experience is neither divorced from practical interest nor entirely set apart from “the

everyday events, doings, sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” (1934:3). Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has argued that the exercise of disinterested judgment is itself adjudicated by specific class interests. Rather than the spontaneous agreement of the faculties, Bourdieu argued that the “aesthetic disposition” is *learned* along with a larger worldview that accords with bourgeois interests (1984: 54). While also affirming the embodied, sensible and therefore political character of aesthetics, Ranciere (2004, 2009; cf. Tanke 2010) summons Schiller’s (1967) transfiguration of Kant to suggest that aesthetic experiences can themselves transfigure our modes of perception rendering moral and political change possible (or impossible).

This chapter builds on these critiques in several ways. I affirm the continuity of experiences of beauty across the threshold of “art” and “life,” and I take beauty as *learned*, as an object of ongoing social, political, and ethical contestation that bears promise of transformation. But if these studies seek to de-center the major Enlightenment heritage in the study of beauty, the task of this chapter is to re-center the study of beauty within the everyday life that it animates. Rather than extending the critique through another negation, I want to focus on establishing a methodology to discern the work that beauty does in everyday life among some Muslims in Kurdistan. My aim is to trace the actual possibilities that beauty realizes in everyday life, rather than deducing the conditions or criteria of experiences of beauty as such.

Scholarship on beauty in Muslim societies provides one place to start in this task. Scholars have long emphasized the inseparability of ethics and aesthetics in Islamic traditions (Renard 1983), and some have sought to describe an essential unity in Islamic art that connects beauty and ethics with the truth of revelation (Nasr 1987). But in so

doing they have also equated ethical life with the life of piety. This equation has informed anthropological inquiry into the life of contemporary Muslim artists (George 2010) and the broader fragmentation of the domains of ethics, politics, and aesthetics (Furani 2012). In Furani's study of Palestinian poetry, it is the dawning of a secular ontology of European provenance (Furani 2012) that explains this fragmentation. What emerges from these inquiries is a concept of beauty in Islamic traditions that was once historically unified, but threatened with fragmentation by secularization. The question of how beauty might animate the daily life of a Muslim in a way that doesn't fit neatly into categories of "pious" or "secular" has not been sufficiently explored. So this chapter contributes an account of some of the possibilities of beauty in a Muslim society that do not fit neatly into the criteria given by normative discourses. Rather than seeking to identify the criteria for the evaluation of beauty, I will attempt to trace some actual occasions of beauty's appearance in everyday life and discern how these appearances forge a distinctive relation to Kurdistan's normative Islamic traditions. In lieu of reconstructing a theory of beauty based on the "major" traditions of Islamic thought and practice, I seek to discover some possibilities of its appearance at the margins of that tradition,¹ without assuming that they form a unified whole or a singular, stable concept of beauty.

In this task, I turn to a European thinker whose inheritance of Kant is perhaps as complicated as Pexshan's inheritance of Islam (cf. Cavell 1989:87). In the following two passages from Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings and lectures, I find a path cleared for the work of this chapter:

¹ These margins might be called a "minor tradition" following Connolly (2006).

We feel as if he had to *penetrate* phenomena. Our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the “*possibilities*” of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the *kind of statement* we make about phenomena. (1958: para. 90)

We are concentrating, not on the words “good” or “beautiful”, which are entirely uncharacteristic, generally just subject and predicate (“This is beautiful”), but on the occasions on which they are said—on the enormously complicated situation in which the aesthetic expression has a place, in which the expression itself has almost a negligible place. (1938, Lecture I, para. 5)

Accordingly, this chapter concentrates on a series of occasions within “enormously complicated situations” in which particular “kinds of statement” are made concerning beauty.² In some occasions we find that sometimes the word *beauty* itself is not necessarily used (cf. Coleman 1968), and in other occasions we find that beauty is paired with, or pared from, concepts and practices distinctive to Pexshan’s life and to Kurdistan more broadly. The occasions I have selected for this chapter are all connected to the complicated situation of Pexshan’s relationship to Islam. The chapter takes up three such occasions: a scene of inauguration from her childhood in which beauty and Islam are central, an encounter with the supposedly distinctive beauty of the Qur’an, and the conjunction of a typically Islamic practice with a rather atypical kind of beauty. These occasions do not make up a whole, unified concept of beauty. Because beauty appears in distinctive ways, they require us to move with beauty in the diverse modulations through which it is attached to daily life. Each occasion shows how problems of beauty produce distinctive questions that animate Pexshan’s living and her relations to others. The three questions to which this evidence will speak are: What else does one learn when one learns beauty? When a particular kind of beauty is taken as a normative dimension of religious life but one’s experience does not match that norm, how does one encounter that

² Within anthropology, an implicit precedent for this kind of study is found in two classic works on verbal artistry in the Middle East: Abu-Lughod (1999: 28) and Gilsenan (1996: 250ff).

disappointment? In the wake of this disappointment, how might other kinds of beauty become attached to or expressive of a way of life?

Of the many scenes from her youth that Pexshan sketched for me in our time together, two will provide a starting point for this chapter's exploration of beauty's appearance in daily life. The evidence at hand comes from conversations I shared with Pexshan during a period in her life that she described by saying "*tak u tenya... her xomim*," "I'm all alone, just me." By 2008, she had withdrawn from the busy life of her employment and engagements with a constantly morphing group of artists and poets in Suleimani. The solitude to which she referred also encompassed the absence of her father and her husband, both of whom had long since passed away. "I've grown old," she would say with a sigh, which sometimes explained why she didn't know some younger poets, why she preferred to stay at home rather than go out for the evening, or why she had found it necessary to change her diet. Though she was then in her late fifties, she seemed both to look younger and to feel much older. But her aging solitude also encompassed the continuing presence of young children, grandchildren, and a host of other relatives in her home, and it encompassed the time that she shared with me as a researcher and friend. I visited her and her family on a bi-weekly basis for much of 2008 and 2009, usually sitting in the guest room where two long couches faced one another, with a television at one end of the room and a large bookshelf at the other. In the time I spent there, we often read several poems together and I took detailed notes on her exposition of words, images, and metaphors that captured her attention and deserved mine. These periods of study were a kernel around which grew quiet television-watching, elaborate or simple meals, naps planned or unplanned, some occasional

laundry, and many long conversations. I had also developed the habit of sharing with her my own questions and thoughts and I commonly reported to her the thoughts and expressions of others that I found puzzling or interesting. Through descriptions of language or poetry or folklore or politics, she often explained phrases that interested me. I prized our relationship in part because of the way that the genre of the “interview” was present as absent: I often scribbled notes as we spoke and I shared with her notes I had scribbled while others spoke. So many years of such scribbling made it a rather ordinary affair. The time that she shared with me in that room often became reflective and ruminative: she often looked back upon the length of her life and described scenes or events from her childhood that, retrospectively, took the form of inauguration. The following section addresses two such scenes of inauguration—into Islam and into poetry.

Scenes of Instruction

These two scenes are an example of what might be called a “scene of instruction” (Das 1998: 177-178) through which a child finds inauguration into an already moral world. If we imagine this inauguration as acquainting a child with the ethical norms of a given form of life, then the scenes that Pexshan describes will require us to consider the diverse modes of acquaintance with beauty that are possible in such inauguration. Here it is less a matter of learning what beauty *is*, than of what one *does* with it. The contention arises not in a disagreement about whether this or that is beautiful, or whether it is beautiful or not, but in the kind of posture or attitude one must assume toward beautiful things.

Before turning to the evidence I want to address in advance the sense in which Pexshan’s attitude might be called transgressive. Anthropologists have been concerned

with understanding how transgressive tendencies persist in the aesthetic dimensions of ritual action, sometimes erupting as a surprise or a seeming rift in the fabric of ethical norms (Abu-Lughod 1999, Gilsenan 1996, Crapanzano 1980, Hamoudi 1993). But if the abiding concern of those studies is to demonstrate how such seeming rifts form part of the dense weave of ethical norms, then our concern is to show how ambivalence might provide an opening onto a different mode of relating to ethical norms. I believe the vocabulary of transgression is not helpful for this and so I want to pose the questions in this way: How might scenes of instruction be so wrought with paradox that a child emerges with self-conscious ambivalence about the status of some ethical norms? This is a question that is less concerned with “transgression” than with the kinds of difference and paradox that everyday life can sustain. A guiding insight for our inquiry into Pexshan’s daily life as a child comes from Cavell’s caution that we are often “too quick to suppose we know what the child is learning” (1979:171). In the following scenes, it may be tempting to suppose that Pexshan’s father was teaching her the proper way to be a Muslim. Indeed, this occurred in part through formal instruction in the Qur’an and the *hadith*—the two sources that scholars have recognized as foundational elements of the discursive tradition in which Muslim ethical practice is constituted (Asad 1986, Bowen 1993). But of paramount importance here is not merely the content of the lessons, nor the argumentative form that they enact, but the posture or attitude toward beauty in the thought, action, and perception that accompany them. Pexshan’s father was quite keen on offering instruction to his daughters in a particular aesthetic bearing in the world that we might gloss as manners or conduct (“*adab*,” cf. Metcalf 1984). But what Pexshan seems to have learned was not a simple mirror of what he was teaching. Neither

“transgressive” nor exactly “normative,” this attitude toward beauty is distinctly paradoxical. So let us hold open these two questions: What else does one learn when one learns beauty? How might a “moral” lesson be transformed in the learning?

Scene One: A *Hadith*

When I was young, my father was continuously praying and worshipping (berdewam nwêju ibadetî ekird), but I didn't like those things. I remember him telling us that photos and statues were sinful (gunahe). I had a statue of a naked woman, but I kept it in my own room.

I asked, “Did your father tell you to pray?”, and she replied:

Well, of course he always told us, but he never did anything [about it]. I remember when they would wake up for pershew³ and call to me, but I would not get up to eat. But [later on] I once overheard my mother when she said, “She doesn't fast.” I didn't like any of that stuff. But my faith is greater now than it was then. I have more faith.

I asked, “Where did that come from?”

From experience, you know. And thinking about things. . . . Every night, my father used to gather us together and read the hadith to us. I remember one night he told of a hadith about this: There were two men. One of them was faithful (imandar), he was always praying and worshipping (nwêj u ibadet). The other one would never pray. When they died and they were taken before God, God asked them, “For what sake should I pardon you? For the sake of your deeds or for the sake of my own mercy?” (be ç bitbaxshim?, be îshîto ya be rehmetîxom?) God first asked the faithful man, and the faithful man told God he wanted to be judged according to his deeds because he had always been praying and worshipping God. Then God told him [missing from my notes] and he sent him to hell! Then God went to the other man, and asked the same question. Of course, the man had done nothing in his life, no praying or worshipping or anything, and so the man said, “Well, I can only say, on your own mercy,” and God said [her tone rises in excitement as she reaches the peak of the narrative] “Go on!” (dey bro!) and sent him to heaven!

“So what does it mean for you?” I asked.

It means, why should you bother with all of this prayer and worship in your life if that is what will happen?!

³ *Pershew*: The pre-dawn meal taken during Ramazan just before the beginning of the day's fast.

Of the many things taken for granted in this short conversation, one was my knowledge that Pexshan still did not “like prayer and worship.” Though the problem of how this became known to me—the array of explicit disavowals, small gestures, and light jokes—is an important one that is addressed in other chapters, for now it must suffice to say that given our friendship, her first words here bear the implication of saying “*even then* I didn’t like prayer and worship.” Her attitude is described by a series of oppositions with her father. He prayed and worshipped, and she didn’t like these things. He regarded photos and statues as reprehensible (*gunahe*), while she kept one. If she did not use the word on this occasion, Pexshan had mentioned this statue to me before and described it as beautiful, *cwan*. And, it is important to note, her father commanded her to pray and fast, while her mother quietly acknowledged that she would not. Though the words themselves could bear any number of meanings and implications, the tone in which Pexshan reported her mother’s speech (“she doesn’t fast”) suggests it was something common and matter-of-fact, not invested with the tone of censure or disapproval that one is led to imagine coming from her father. The fact that these words were *overheard* draws our attention to the kind of learning that became available to Pexshan through her mother. Considering her mother’s tone, we can see that there emerges an opposition between her mother’s report and her father’s instruction: the one who calls statues reprehensible and calls her to prayer and fasting, and the other who quietly acknowledges that she will not. One may also hear how these two attitudes are then repeated in the scene described in the hadith: one man makes a claim to heaven on the basis of his works, as Pexshan’s father seems to ask of her, while another man resembles her mother

by relying on God's acknowledgment and acceptance of him despite his lack of performing the proper deeds.

This perspective will enable us to discern the paradox that runs through the heart of the scene of moral instruction that Pexshan has described. On the one hand, her father has gathered her and her sisters to provide ostensive instruction in virtuous living. As becomes a pious Muslim, he takes the sayings of the Prophet as among paramount criteria for such virtuous living, and certainly regards his own efforts to transmit knowledge of these criteria to his children as part of his own moral striving. But on the other hand, the scene of instruction is shot through with the paradox that it becomes for Pexshan a reason *not to* pray or fast. And her retelling of the scene seems to suggest that her father had not appreciated the very *hadith* he related. But neither does Pexshan take her own appreciation of the *hadith* as the grounds for a claim to her own piety. On the contrary, what she vaguely hints toward in these few words is that she has a kind of *îman* (faith) that is not borne out in acts of piety such as prayer and worship, but was anticipated in hiding the beautiful statue.

Pexshan's father's moral instruction took the form of a calling, a commanding, a gathering together. And following is another scene that begins with the same form and formula: her father *gathered* Pexshan and her sisters. This time the moral instruction was not one explicitly attached to the sayings of the Prophet, but that it had a bearing on virtuous living is beyond question. And again it turns on Pexshan's attraction to beauty.

Scene Two: Romance, Poetry, Laughter

Once my father gathered my sisters and me together and told us all, “Whoever makes dlari [romantic or flirtatious relations, broadly figured], I’ll put my foot on her neck and not take it off until she’s finished (ewey ke dlari ekat—neywut dldari, wuti dlari—⁴, pê m ekeme mlîw la nabem heta nemawe).”

Then, there was a program that was recorded in Iran and was aired on the radio every night. I would listen to it, but it came on at dinnertime, and my father would get angry and he made me go eat with them.

He would always tell us not to laugh in loud voices, too. Sometimes we [Pexshan and her sisters] would be in a room together, and we would forget and laugh, and then we would hear a knock on the door and he would say, “What’s this cackling?!” (ew qîjeqîj chiye?!).⁵

Inaugurated by a gathering, these few sketches of her father’s instruction render him angry and poised for violence. On the one hand, Pexshan describes romance, poetry, and loud laughter as the objects of his ire in ways that would be commonly recognized in Kurdistan. But the English transcript above may not well convey the gendered aspect of his ire that is taken for granted in the context of its expression. It is not romance *per se* that he threatens to strangle, and certainly not romance as a fantasy, but romance as an activity carried out by his daughters. Similarly, the Kurdish term *qîjeqîj* that I translated as “cackling” is clearly marked by gender and refers to prattle or jibber-jabber in a high-pitched tone. The implication is derisive, even if sometimes light-heartedly so. It is less laughter *per se* than the laughter of women at some volume that prompts the brusque

⁴ I have left out of the English translation this side comment by Pexshan in which she emphasized her father’s distinctive accent, swallowing the second “d” in *dildarî* such that it became *dlarî*. This kind of pronunciation is generally associated with Suleimani but several other cities and small villages also show this pattern. Pexshan herself spoke this way and was generally very fond of this style of speaking. The subtlety of this detail bears mentioning, though, because it points to the paradox of her relation to her father that even when he speaks and behaves in a way that seems to her far from beautiful, there is a persistent node of attachment that she was careful to point out to me.

⁵ When I asked why he regarded laughter in this way and how he described it—as *gunahe* (wrongdoing or “sinful”) or something else, she replied that he had called it *‘aybe* (shameful or inappropriate) and not *gunahe*.

reproof of his rapping on the door. In a sense Pexshan's account of his reproof resonates with Asef Bayat's (2007) description of the politics of "fun-damentalism" in which he describes authority figures' fear of fun as a "fear of exit from the paradigm that frames their mastery" (435), except that if Bayat's account is staked on laughter as revealing a fundamental uncertainty in authority figures, Pexshan's description foregrounds the vulnerability of those who laugh.

What binds together these three prohibitions in Pexshan's sketch is a particular bearing toward the ethical instruction. The *threat* of violence toward his daughters' pursuit of romance, the *demand* to turn off poetry on the radio, and the *reproof* of women's laughter become characteristic modes of instruction. What they share in common cannot be indexed by a single term or gesture, but it persists as the ether in which moral instruction takes place, taking shape as bearings toward gendered bodies and words. What then, shall we say that Pexshan learned in these scenes?

On the one hand she gained familiarity with the *hadith*, and also with the procedure of studying *hadith* as a means to become familiar with virtue. But the virtue her father strove to embody became attached to his efforts to sanction Pexshan's attraction to various beauties. The satisfaction afforded by poetry, by laughter, and by the statue hidden away in her room seem to live beneath the threat of her father's foot. And so on the other hand Pexshan finds it impossible to embody this attitude. Ironically, it is her mother's quiet acknowledgement that she simply doesn't fast that is channeled in Pexshan's description of herself, as if the moral capacity to sustain or accommodate different modes of relating to ethical norms were embodied by a silent deferral of the role of "instructor." The moral lesson offered as teaching—as the gathering together of pupils

under authority of a teacher—proved inassimilable. What she learned was a moral capacity to acknowledge her refusal to fast, and this learning happened by overhearing. Along with this learning she acquired a posture toward beauty that required protection and hiding. This posture is not simply transgressive or normative. Pexshan strikes this posture not as one who faces beauty alone, but as one whose attraction to beauty belongs within a web of intimate relations, including a sometimes fragile relation to her father.

In recounting these scenes to me, Pexshan assumed that I would perceive her father's behavior on these occasions⁶ in a particular way. In English I would call it severe, but in Kurdish I would call it *wushk*, which literally translates as “dry,” but is commonly used to refer to attitudes such as the one that her father exemplified in these scenes: a stiffness that is unyielding to spontaneity, a sense of humor, or life's warmth and freshness. One might also say unyielding to beauty. And indeed, in these scenes, Pexshan's reflections on the moral instruction her father made available framed this *wushk*-ness as a force that threatens the beauties of a statue, romance, poetry, and laughter. By no means a “separation” of an ethical disposition from the experience of beauty, her father's ethical disposition seemed to demand a particular kind of attitude toward what Pexshan found beautiful. But in her description of her experience, Pexshan emerges as a doubtful, skeptical child, uncertain about her entry into the moral world to which her father invited her.

⁶ I specify that this characterization relates to a few *occasions* since Pexshan usually spoke admiringly of her father and his general disposition. On a later occasion when I asked her more specifically about her father's attitude toward *dîn*, she described it as “*pak u le ser xo*.” This phrase translates literally as “pure and self-controlled” or “subtle,” and it must be understood as a contrast with the term *tundraw*, or “radical,” which Pexshan used to characterize the modernist trend of Islamist political ambitions.

Qur'an Audition (and a *Hadith* about It)

If the preceding scenes speak as images from the past, those images were meant in part to illuminate the moving present that was constituted by continued relations of ambivalence with the ethical norms underwritten as Islamic. The following scene in which I describe Pexshan's chance encounter with the recited Qur'an brings our attention once again to beauty and its foils. A growing body of literature has been concerned with accounting for the emotional features of Qur'an audition, recitation, and memorization in Muslim societies. Authors of this literature have been concerned to show how the task of beautiful recitation (*tajwīd*) seeks to renew the forceful impact that the Qur'an brought upon its original auditioners (Denny 1989), a practice that has recently been increasingly organized on a large scale as part of the "Islamic awakening" (Gade 2004). These studies place the beauty of the recited Qur'an at the heart of its effectiveness in producing particular ethical and affective states in the auditioner. In this vein, Kristina Nelson has an extensive account of how the quality of *huzn* "embraces all of the qualities of the ideal recitation" (1985:89). Nelson provides describes this quality as a sad softening of the heart that evokes tears and leads one to the virtuous states of penitence and regret for wrongdoing. But nested within her description is a passage attributed to the medieval scholar al-Sha'rani 'Izz Muslim ibn Maymun that is of interest to our inquiry since it raises the prospect of a recitation that fails to achieve beauty:

I was reciting the Qur'an, but I found no beauty in it. So I said to myself "Recite it as if you were hearing it from the Messenger of God (peace be upon him)," and its beauty came. Then I wanted more, so I said "Recite it as if you were hearing it from [the Angel] Gabriel (peace be upon him)," and its beauty increased. Then I said, "Recite it as if you were hearing it from the Lord of all Being," and the whole of its beauty came forth. (1985:97-98)

In this case the recitation's failure is not directly attributed to a moral failing on the part of the auditioner (who is in this case also the reciter). The failure of beauty is immediately redressed by an imaginative venture that connects the auditioner to God and enables the achievement of beauty. If most studies of Qur'an audition have privileged the normative movement by which ethical virtues are restored through aesthetic procedures, our inquiry is directed toward the prospect of other futures for that failure. Chapter One briefly examined one such future, the ethical state of vulnerability that was explained through a vocabulary that seeks to depart from pietistic traditions. Although Serdar was touched by the beauty of the Qur'an, he wanted to call it a human beauty rather than a religious beauty. But the questions that Pexshan's case presents are somewhat different. What if the Qur'an's beauty does not come? And what if one doesn't bother to invite that beauty?

—

Exactly one month before the beginning of Ramazan in 2008, I accompanied Pexshan and her daughter to a restaurant for lunch. Though preparations for the month of fasting had not begun in earnest, I had heard many express their anticipation—often with a sense of weariness, in part because each year the length of the days during which fasting was to take place grew longer. Perhaps the approach of Ramazan was one factor leading to the selection of a television station at the restaurant. As we walked up the stairs to the “family” section where female patrons and their companions were seated, we saw that we were the only ones in the restaurant at three o'clock in the afternoon. But there was a resounding echo in the room as the television broadcast a reading of the Qur'an at a high volume. I asked in an off-hand fashion whether it was indeed Qur'an,

and after listening for a moment, Pexshan confirmed that it was. A bit puzzled but interested, I told her it was the first time I had seen and heard such a thing in a restaurant. “I don’t know why they’re doing that,” she said calmly, and it didn’t seem to me at that moment that she was particularly interested or disturbed by the fact. But as soon as one of the servers passed by, she called to him and told him brusquely, “For God’s sake, change that Qur’an.” The server’s expression showed his surprise at her tone. While he seemed to be surprised by the request, he also seemed to share my sense that Pexshan’s request expressed a simple disinterest in hearing the Qur’an. That is to say that it sounded in that moment as if she didn’t want to listen to Qur’an at all, in part because her request had not been simply to quiet the loud volume, nor did she couch her request in words of respect that might have served to undermine the doubt that she simply didn’t want to hear any recitation of the Qur’an. It was a cold and curt request, and the server was not quick to comply. In the intervening moments, she said plaintively to us at the table, in a voice barely audible given the echoing Qur’an, “This is a restaurant and we came to eat. Why this Qur’an?”

While Pexshan was clearly displeased at hearing the Qur’an recitation broadcast in the restaurant, the reasons were not quite clear to me. Did *this kind* of audition show disrespect to the Qur’an because the atmosphere was a casual, inattentive one? Or did she feel that the atmosphere was demanding of her that she listen to the Qur’an? With this uncertainty before me, I recounted a *hadith* that I had heard a few days before, to the effect that when one listens to the Qur’an, one should give it one’s whole attention and not be distracted by anything else. “Isn’t there a *hadith* like that?” I asked, to which she replied blandly, “I don’t know.” But a moment later when the Qur’an was still echoing

over the table, requiring us to raise our voices to be heard by one another, she said in a tone full of exasperation and annoyance, “What is this? A funeral?!” She then went on to comment that the Qur’an creates a sorrowful (*xembar*) atmosphere. (Here she referred to the very feature of *huzn* that Nelson’s account of Qur’an audition emphasizes.)

Eventually the television station was changed and we resumed our conversation. When the topic turned to the approaching month of Ramazan, both Pexshan and her daughter let out exasperated sighs, and I remember her daughter anticipating that most of her friends—who did not usually wear headscarves—would don them during the month of Ramazan.⁷ She explained how it would be expected of her also, and how she would be called upon to account for her not wearing the headscarf. The imminence of Ramazan was described in other unsavory ways: the government offices don’t do any work; people become lazy and sleep all day, then they spend twice as much money on food when they’re supposed to be eating less; shopkeepers raise the prices of everything; and some people leave the country and go to Europe just because they can’t stand everyone nagging them about not fasting. I might characterize their descriptions by saying that they described themselves as victims waiting to suffer in Ramazan. Without any plans to fast or pray, the time of Ramazan was like an unwelcome affliction.

My comment about the Qur’an requiring certain conditions for its audition was shot through with two kinds of irony. First, the *hadith* that I cited had been recited to me in a very different context. In fact, I was in the company of a man who had gotten into a

⁷ Women such as Serdar’s wife understood the scarf as a sign of respect and deference to the divine that might not be sustainable for the entire year but nonetheless cannot be shirked during the month of Ramazan. Here Pexshan’s daughter rehearsed a complaint that is very common in Kurdistan: if wearing the scarf is an act of pious obedience to God, then why only obey God for one-twelfth of the year? Embedded in this complaint is the accusation that the scarf was a kind of sign by which women wished (merely) to show others that they were fasting. To display one’s piety in this way for the sake of others for a short time and neglect one’s piety before God for the majority of the time was a paramount case of *duruyî*—two-facedness or hypocrisy.

heated discussion about the famous Egyptian singer Umm Kalthum. The man had been expounding on the beauty of her voice, her music, and how she had kept audiences rapt with attention. He recited the words to one of her songs but when he sensed that *his* audience was not paying attention, he recited the *hadith* in Arabic and exclaimed in Kurdish, “When someone is reciting Umm Kalthum, you should pay attention to it!” On that occasion the citation occurred in the course of a simple dispute about everyday conduct, and in some sense the *hadith* was summoned as an authoritative pronouncement according to which to measure one’s conduct. But one misses the point entirely unless one can hear the irony with which the citation occurs, since such a citation quite explicitly and self-consciously submits the overarching authority of the *hadith* to the contingent needs of the context of citation, substituting the words of God referred to in the *hadith* with the words of Umm Kalthum. Stemming from an environment saturated with disputation where it sometimes seems that *hadith* can be summoned to support any argument, this citation works as a jest toward the practice of citing *hadith* to justify one’s ethical practice—or just as likely, one’s ethical demands upon others. Along with that citation, therefore, came the quiet snicker of irony.

Second, my citation of the *hadith* sets it up as potentially holding authority over conduct in everyday life. In a sense, I was proffering a perspective on her refusal to listen to the Qur’an that would have allowed that refusal to be accommodated within a normative relation to Islam. The argumentative logic I had suggested ran something like this: refusing to listen to the Qur’an in this way could be understood as an instance of respecting the Qur’an and behaving as a proper Muslim might. Of course, given the context of my relation to Pexshan and my understanding of her relationship to Islam,

immanent to my own citation was part of the irony that I had heard when it was recited to me. But the question presented her with the opportunity to frame her disinterest in hearing the Qur'an at that moment as either pointing out some kind of hypocrisy on the part of those who were listening to it in such a way, or as bearing some other reasons. Since I had posed that suggestion in the form of a question, it was Pexshan's turn to respond.

There are many aspects of her response that remain indiscernible to me—for example, to what extent my status as a Christian figured into the modality of her reply, the various distractions in the restaurant at the time that mitigated against a longer discussion of the topic, what she knew or didn't know about this particular *hadith*, or what mistakes I may have made in recounting it. And to whatever extent she perceived the prospect of irony in my citation of the *hadith*, she did not acknowledge it with the quiet snicker that accompanied its recitation to me. But what is discernable in her response is a flat disinterest in accounting for her refusal to listen to the Qur'an at that moment by reference to the *hadith*. I say flat because the tone of her voice betrayed no curiosity or investment in the *hadith* or the argumentative logic I had suggested.

If Nelson is correct that every recitation of the Qur'an ought to foreground the quality of *huzn*, then Pexshan's remark about its sorrowful atmosphere may be taken as an indication that the recitation had, on its own terms, succeeded. Accordingly, the sense of the "moral summons" of the Qur'an (Renard 1983) is extended through the aesthetic features of its recitation. Through other conversations it was clear to me that Pexshan was intimately familiar with the normative expectation that the sorrowful beauty of the recited Qur'an prompt tears. But Pexshan's response was neither to embrace the quality

of *huzn*, nor to exempt this particular occasion from the general expectation that *huzn* lead to virtuous ethical states. The Qur'an was simply not beautiful to her. Although she didn't use the term *cwan*, "beautiful," on this occasion, on other occasions she did say so in as many words: "Maybe for Arabs it could be beautiful, but for me, it's not so beautiful." The beauty of the Qur'an, thus, is available to those who take up its discourse of ethical transformation, and also to those who know Arabic as their own tongue. But on this occasion Pexshan does not count herself among either group. In the face of the expectations that a sorrowful recitation be a beautiful one and that a moral summons to piety accompany this beauty, Pexshan shows her disappointment.

In the wake of this disappointment, what remains of beauty? Pexshan had described her posture toward beauty as a protective one that shelters a small statue, the audition of poetry and a burst of laughter from her father's threats and reproof. I suggested that posture sets beauty apart from *wushki* or dryness. Here, too, we see that beauty is pried away from the sorrowfulness of the recited Qur'an. So where does Pexshan find beauty? And to what other goods and practices is it attached?

Fasting with Zardasht Khayyam

If the Qur'an and the *hadith* are the discursive foundation for Muslim ethical practice, but their force has been delimited as in Pexshan's case, then how does one justify what one does? If the beauty of the recited Qur'an was inaccessible to Pexshan, what kinds of beauty were available? These two questions shall guide our reflection on a third conversation I shared with Pexshan. Paradoxically, we shall find her engaging in one of the activities most commonly associated with Muslim piety—a term by which I gloss a

family of terms in Kurdish, including *muselmani chak* (a good Muslim), *xwattrs* (Godfearing) and *dîndar* (one who bears religion)—but Pexshan does not want to call it pious.

During the second week of Ramazan I found myself at her home once again. It was customary during times other than Ramazan for hosts to offer at least a glass of water (often a cup of tea) to a guest upon entering the home. During Ramazan, there were different traditions in Kurdistan for hosting Christians and Muslims who were known not to fast. Many hosts offered guests water as a sign of hospitality. Some traditions allowed hosts to show respect by not eating or drinking anything in the company of those who were fasting, and accordingly did not offer anything. Given my acquaintance with Pexshan's family and their general attitude toward prayer and fasting, it was no surprise that I was offered water upon entering their home. We read quite a bit of poetry that day and then I announced that I wanted to get home in time to dine with my host family, who would be breaking their fast at the evening prayer, which would be called for in about 30 minutes. In the ten minutes before I left, the following conversation happened. It was not rushed, but ruminative.

I said that I wanted to leave in order to make it home for *iftar* (the evening meal breaking the fast) with my host family, and then Pexshan asked if everyone there fasted—seeming to find it odd that a foreign Christian had found lodging with such pious Muslims. I answered that almost everyone fasts, but everyone has *iftar*. (This was a bit of a joke since it had the bland admission that everyone feels happy to eat whether they've been fasting or not, and even has the sly suggestion that some would be so happy

to eat that they would eat *as if* they had fasted.) She grinned and said, “It’s been three or four days now that I fasted.” Surprised and incredulous, I asked, “Really?”

Yeah, it’s nice. I stay up all night watching TV, then get up late in the morning and I don’t want to eat anything. Next thing I know, the day is over and I haven’t eaten anything. The problem is that we [it seems that she meant Kurds in Suleimani] eat so much: rice, bread, fruits, tea. But it’s nice, when you don’t eat for a whole day, you feel comfortable (israhat ekeyt).

In this last sentence she made a gesture with her hands to indicate that she meant a corporeal comfort, so I asked if her fasting was for religious reasons or health reasons.

No, it wasn’t religious reasons. We can say it was approximately health reasons.

“That means, you fasted, but you didn’t pray,” I said, earnestly wondering whether some dramatic transfiguration had taken place. She responded as if by wondering whether she had prayed, I had conceived the inconceivable: “Nooooo!” Then after a pause she went on:

You know, you look around and everyone is praying and fasting, and so you are somehow compelled to fast, for whatever reason.

I nodded my head to show that I heard what she was saying. My face must have betrayed my interest since she then continued again:

But there was no fasting in Zoroastrianism. But he had some beautiful sayings. He said, “Think well, speak well, do well” (biri chak, qsey chak, kari chak). That’s brilliant (ewe blîmete). Because thinking well without speaking well is nothing. And speaking well without doing well is also nothing. But you need all three. Zerdesh himself was a doctor. He looked at those he treated. He saw that some of them were healed, but others were not healed, and they died. He was very sad (zor xefetî xward) for those who died and he wanted to know why it was that some died and some recovered. So he went to the mountains to ask, what are the forces that save or kill? He said that there is darkness (tarîkî), and there is light (runakî). That darkness is what brings the bad, but the light is what brings the good. It’s beautiful [his idea]. I think the same thing, really. I don’t think that the one who builds is the one who destroys, also. Just like what Xeyam says about that glass: would God have made the humans only in order to destroy them? But here [in Kurdistan] they [Muslims] say that they [Zoroastrians]

worshiped fire. But it wasn't like that. They thought fire was sacred. They lived in a place where it was cold, and rainy, and snowy, and so fire was sacred. He had a beautiful saying. He said that there are three things that should not be dirtied: earth, water, and wind. So don't throw your trash out into the open, and don't dirty the springs. He said that if you want to become a good person, go be a farmer, because then you will understand that humans are just like the earth. They depend on the light of the sun for life. The sun doesn't make any distinction between humans and animals and plants. It shines on all of us. It's a beautiful religion.

Then Pexshan's face cringed up in repulsion and disgust and she moved to a different topic: "But this Islam . . . this Islam. . . ." Then returning to a casual tone and giving me a report, she continued:

There is a series on now for Ramazan that talks about Abu Ja'afar Al-Mansour. It describes all that he did to become Caliph. Oh, how many people he killed! [Here again she takes the disgusted face as above] All these people he killed!

I asked, "In Ramazan they talk about these things in a critical way?" She replied:

No, it just talks about how he became Caliph, and what he did. But these Caliphs in Islam, some of them had children imprisoned, who were heirs of relatives of theirs. One jailed a few children who were six or seven years old, and after a few days, he sent someone there. He took them out of the jail. And he killed them. Because he didn't want them to claim the caliphate when they grew up. What a repulsive culture (yek kulturi pes betewe). Islam, from the very beginning, was about killing people. Whatever got into its path, it killed them. Like that boy Hussein, the son of Ali, they killed him, too, but he was so smart. He spent all day and all night praying, praying and reading. But they killed him. . . . Stealing money and killing people. . . . Now they say that Islam is this or that [the sense of this was, "they say Islam is violent or not violent"]. I don't even know. But it is a violent religion. What do you say?

I then repeated the words I had recently heard when speaking to a (Muslim) journalist who had said that she accepted the prophets, and she even accepted Prophet Muhammad as the last prophet. She had said, "But he himself said that he was the last prophet. And if we look at history, what are the things that have brought benefit to humans after that? All the great contributions are in literature and philosophy. So how I can refuse those accomplishments?" Pexshan answered, "There's a novelist—what's his name? He's

American. . . . Colin . . . Colin . . . Colin Powell?” I told her he had been the Secretary of Defense and we shared a good laugh before she finally found the name she was looking for:

Colin Wilson! Colin Wilson said somewhere that when humans learned to write novels, they had no more need for heaven, because both are imagination (xeyal). . . . [long pause] But this religion . . . this religion . . . it fucks with your mind (mêshkt egat), it doesn't let you believe, and it doesn't let you not believe. But like Xeyam says . . . there is no need for doubt (guman), and no need for certainty (yaqîn).

Then we turned to the subject of the Hajj, and she said that Hajj was something that was “outdated” or had “expired” (*be ser chu*). She went on:

It existed before Islam. It was a yearly journey to Mecca for trade. And the Prophet didn't dare to interrupt that, and so he told the Muslims to make that journey, too, so that Mecca would not fall. They needed that trade. But look at it now, look at all these millions of dollars that the Saudis have collected from the people making Hajj. I told this to my brother, and he said, “Oh, you are a kafir!!” and I said, “Well, look: Don't make Hajj, take that money and give it to the home of someone who is poor.” But going on Hajj, what kind of virtue is that?

—

Be roju bun is one of the most common Sorani Kurdish terms for fasting in contemporary urban Kurdistan. Though used primarily to describe the activity required of Muslims during the month of Ramazan (and sometimes practiced in other times as well), it is also used to describe other forms of fasting. Thus, for example, I often heard this term when discussing whether fasting was also required of Christians. It was also used to describe a period of fasting required before a medical procedure. And this is the term that Pexshan used both to inquire about the practice of my hosts and to describe what she had done for three or four days. But what kind of fasting is this?

To begin with, although she is reticent about the designation of her fasting as for “health reasons,” Pexshan readily dismisses the idea that she was doing it for “religious reasons.” The term *hokarî dînî* (religious reasons) is not at all a transparent one, but here I take her denial that the reasons for her fasting were “religious” as a way of saying that it is not *the same* kind of fasting that is practiced by Muslims in Ramazan—the very Muslims who had led her to fast. One may be tempted to understand her reasoning here merely as a disavowal of those practices that currently pass as Islamic, and therefore as a means by which she lays claim to a more true or pure or authentic Islam. In this line of reasoning, Pexshan would appear as a pious Muslim whose path to righteousness involved a disavowal of pretense and social custom. But the rest of her speech shows how such an interpretation becomes untenable. Conversely, one might regard her as parroting the claims of secular intellectuals who are committed materialist/historicist approaches to the early history of Islam—approaches that have been actively encouraged by imperialist political apparatuses (cf. Mahmood 2006). Indeed, we would be remiss to fail to recognize this element in her speech. It is particularly pronounced in those sentences describing the violence of the Caliphs. But to rest with such an account is to undermine the density of Pexshan’s enmeshment in pious discourses and to underestimate the complexity of the conditions under which the discourses of secular intellectuals come to bear force for her. So let us investigate those conditions with the suspicion that they are not fully determined either by the aspiration to piety or the discourse of secular intellectual criticism.

In the first place, the idea of fasting *accidentally* does not resonate with any discourse of piety to which I was exposed in Kurdistan. On the contrary, those

discourses always emphasized intention (*niyet*) as a pre-condition for the proper performance of a day of fasting.⁸ Second, she clearly disavows the prospect that she also pray while fasting in this way. She does not merely claim to practice a kind of prayer that is different from the prayer required of Muslims, but she makes it clear that she abstains from the practice altogether. Indeed, she gave the sense in her response that praying was almost unthinkable.

Thirdly, the ensuing description of the beauty of Zoroastrianism becomes an elliptical and paradoxical way of understanding Pexshan's fasting. Such elliptical justification requires careful attention. Pexshan initially points out that there was no fasting in Zoroastrianism and so she explicitly forgoes the claim that she fasts *as* or *as if* she were Zoroastrian. It is clear that the invocation of Zoroastrianism is only meant to make sense of her fasting retrospectively. In the long description of Zoroastrianism that follows, Pexshan paints a picture of a religion whose practices and principles emerge from the needs of a people living in a given material environment. Zardasht himself is valorized for having started from his own experience as a physician (implicit in this valorization is a contrast with common depictions of the Prophet Muhammad as one whose prophetic office was bestowed upon him from above). Then she describes the regard for fire as sacred as a consequence of living in a place where one's well being was threatened by the cold. Accordingly, the dictates not to corrupt the most precious elements of nature emerge from an intimate relationship with the earth, wind, and water. Thus although she does not explicitly tie the argument together in this way, Pexshan does

⁸ According to Paul Powers' survey of several classical works in *fiqh* or Islamic law, "Niyya turns the undifferentiated flow of human gestures and movements into *particular named actions*, especially the actions required by God and regulated by *fiqh*" (2006:43). In the words of one commentator, fasting without intention to do so is merely "lack of nourishment" (44).

suggest that fasting enables her to relate to her body just as Zoroastrians related to their natural environment. (On another occasion she extended this logic to an account of the institution of fasting in early Arabia by claiming that it made sense for people to fast since they were poor desert nomads and had little more than the milk and yoghurt from their herds to sustain them.)

Pexshan's short description of Zoroastrianism is brought to a close by the simple sentence uttered in a tone of awe, which refers to the brilliance of the fundamental tenets of the religion: "It's beautiful." But the simplicity of the sentence matches its significance, particularly for an analysis situated in the domain of aesthetics and ethics. If we pause to consider the difference between calling it beautiful (*cwane*) and calling it right or true (*rast*), or real (*haqiqi*), then we can understand how the persuasiveness of Zoroastrian ideas is cast not in terms of rationalist historicism, but in terms of beauty. Rather than setting Zoroastrianism and Islam against one another in a debate about the truth, Pexshan draws them apart from one another in terms of beauty. And the "beauty" of Zoroastrianism is not that of an embodied way of life. In the many conversations we had on the topic, Pexshan never mentioned any knowledge of Zoroastrianism beyond what she learned from its representation in books, poetry, and oral tradition. Rather than justifying or authorizing her practice within a normative Islamic account, the discussion of Zoroastrianism works to *beautify* her fast. Here Pexshan resembles the artist of whom Nietzsche asked, "How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not?" (1974:239).

Pexshan's claim here makes clear the history in which Kurdish nationalist movements drew upon the idea of a Kurdish civilization that preceded the arrival of Islam

at the hands of Arabs. Organized by Zoroastrianism, this primordial religious identity was summoned in the struggle against the rulers who would claim that the Kurds' status as Muslims renders their ethnic identities irrelevant to their Iraqi citizenship. This ideology was key to the popularization of the poetic expression that Pexshan cited as showing the core of Zoroastrianism's beauty: "think well, speak well, do well." This aspect of Kurdish nationalist thought has become an object of particular ire among a class of Kurdish Muslims who discern behind this ideology a desire to qualify or reject aspects of Islam's arrival in Kurdistan. Thus in 2008, Pexshan's evocation should be read in light of this ongoing dialogue: not merely an evocation of a Kurdish nationalist ideology, it is also a reaction to the disapproving reaction to this ideology.

The citation of Omar Khayyam's poetry in this context is significant since Pexshan suggested a resonance between Khayyam's thought and Zoroastrianism. But she also suggested resonance with a theological disputation about the distribution of good and bad within or beyond a divine creative origin. Thus Pexshan's words are poised less as an effort to take sides in a debate than as words that emerge from the exhaustion of a debate. "They say Islam is this or that," she said disinterestedly, as if disputation reached a point of exhaustion or expiration beyond which one could only pass with a poetic word (cf. Das 2010:247).

While Pexshan indicated that her fasting was not to be understood as the fasting expected of Muslims, she also clearly acknowledged that fasting as part of the inspiration for her own "accidental" fasting. Thus in a sense she has rendered the practice of fasting accessible to herself. But through her account of its benefits, the practice of fasting is itself transfigured to the point at which it is not recognizable as inspired by "religious"

(read “Islamic”) reasons. Pexshan’s account of the beauty of Zoroastrianism framed that beauty as inaccessible to other contemporary Kurdish Muslims and therefore designated in terms of *kafir*—heresy or infidelity. In other words, Pexshan here indicates that the condition for the accessibility of a normative Muslim practice was a passage through infidelity: fasting gave comfort not because it shows adherence to divine dictates of normative Islamic discourse, but because it accords with the beauty of Zoroastrianism.

This notion of a passage through infidelity as a condition for the accessibility of the practice of fasting may also shed light on two other topics in Pexshan’s speech. First, consider the question she put to me about whether or not Islam is a violent religion. She was very familiar with Western media reports on Islam, and similar notions of Islam’s connections to violence have been put to use by polemicists and secularists within Kurdistan. But the context of her question makes it clear that Pexshan was not testing the accuracy of my vision. She was rather acknowledging the blurriness of her own vision, as it were, and creating an opening through which her view of the matter could become open to the effect of my views. I was unnerved by this invitation and expressed my view insofar as it was echoed in the words of another Kurdish Muslim to whom I had recently spoken. But Pexshan insisted once again on connecting that view to something Euro-American (British, in fact) and Christian (if only by virtue of being Euro-American) by citing Colin Wilson’s adage about novels and heaven. Her openness to my opinion stems in part, I believe, from the confidence that emerged through the length of our acquaintance. But it also resonates with a sense of exhaustion from a debate that she later glosses as “Islam is this or Islam is that.” In this sense, turning to me or to Colin Wilson is a turning to what she figures as an *outside* of the deliberation that has left her fatigued

or exhausted. (This turning away from debate resonates with Serdar's turning away from the Islamic system of his brother in Chapter One, except that while Serdar was able to silently accept his brother's invitations while turning away, Pexshan's gestures carry the weight of fatigue and exhaustion.)

A second topic that shows how a passage through infidelity became a condition for the accessibility of fasting is the conversation Pexshan reported sharing with her brother. In that conversation, her claim that the Hajj was something outdated was met with a pointed accusation of infidelity. It was only after her brother made the accusation that she attempted to recover the virtue (*xêr*) of the Hajj by suggesting that the money for the journey be given to the poor. In addition to showing something about Pexshan's ethical orientation and that of her brother, this conversation proves insightful for understanding how the term *kafir* circulates in Kurdistan. In Pexshan's report, it was a casual accusation that did not bear consequences of the kind often attested in studies of contemporary heresy or apostasy (Johansen 2003). The consequence of the accusation, in this case, was an ongoing conversation between intimates about the possible and impossible virtues of a practice like the Hajj. The circulation through the domain of the *kafir* did not exclude her either from the practices of Islam or from the virtues described in Islamic discourse. But the terms of her engagement transfigure both the practice and the virtue into terms that she barely recognizes as Islamic. She may fast, but she does not characterize it as the fasting that falls within the bounds of Islam.

How does one express the paradoxes engendered by fasting without praying or intending to fast, fasting in accordance with the beauty of Zoroastrian principles, and giving to the poor rather than making Hajj? There is a citation in Pexshan's speech that

captures precisely that paradox. The second of two poems by Khayyam that she mentioned was glossed by the idea that “there is no need for doubt, and no need for certainty.” I found the poem in the Kurdish translation by Sheikh Selam, which is the version Pexshan told me on several occasions that she prefers (2007:28):

Qewmê xerik mezheb u dînin
Hendê damawî shek u yaqînî
Haka (ha) carchî dengî hel brî
Hemutan kwêrin rêy rast nabînin

I might render into English thus:

There is a group who are busy with sect and religion
And some others are plagued by doubt and certainty
“Oh, fools!” The voice of the town crier shall come
“You are all blind and do not see the way!”

To render into English from the original Farsi that accompanies Sheikh Selam’s translation (2007:28):

There is a group that thinks in terms of sect and religion
And there is a bunch who are ecstatic about doubt and certainty
[But] I fear one day a voice will rise to say:
“Oh, you ill-informed, the way is neither *this* nor *that*.”⁹

The subtle distinctions that appear in these different renditions open the door to rich thoughts. On the one hand it makes clear the necessity of attending to “Pexshan’s Khayyam” and bears witness to the many transfigurations of which Khayyam’s work is capable (Aminrazavi 2005). But perhaps just as impressive as the variation between these versions is the resonance between them. For although Sheikh Salaam’s Kurdish translation trades the mention of a pair of “this and that” in the final line for an accusation

⁹ Translating from the Farsi of a more recent critical edition (Faroughi 1371:53), the poem would look slightly different:

There is a group of thinkers who are in the way of religion
There is a group who suppose they have found the way of certainty
[But] I fear one day a voice will rise to say:
“Oh, you ill-informed, the way is neither *this* nor *that*.”

of blindness, it maintains the sense that *neither* this *nor* that way is the Way. So if part of the poem's beauty lies in the musical rhyme that is endangered by translation, the sense of an opposition frustrated (or denounced) by a *neither/nor* persists across each version. Pexshan's citation of the poem derives its force from the analogy that it establishes: believing might be called the way of religion, and not believing might be called the way of certainty. When Islam "fucks with your mind," it doesn't allow you to believe or to not believe. If these words leave one confused as to what kind of doctrinal statement they contain, they leave one with a clear sense of the force of paradox, of the texture of Pexshan's ethical dilemma. If we take the poem as indexing a moment in Pexshan's relationship to Islam as of "neither/nor" character, then we can see how it resonates across several levels of her ethical orientation: her fast is neither the fast of Zoroastrians, nor that of good Muslims; she neither believes nor does she not believe; she is neither *kafir* nor *not a kafir*.

Writing about another great Persian poet, Mawlana Rumi, Fatemeh Keshavarz (1998:31ff) has described the role of paradox in Rumi's mystical verse as producing an incomplete experience that leaves one full of anticipation. The trope of paradox in this conversation with Pexshan resonates with that account in many ways. Khayyam's poem is less a summary or resolution than a moment within a more extended movement, and one has a strong sense that Pexshan's moral experience will not rest at any verbal expression, whether in doctrine or in poetry. But if Keshavarz emphasizes the role of paradox as both taking the place of strictly logical formulations and preceding the arrival of silence as "the ultimate solution to all the unexpressed and unarticulated paradoxes of our existence" (48), then Pexshan's paradoxes are what provide the texture for ongoing

interactions with other Muslims—both those in Suleimani at large who expect (and inspire) her to fast, and her brother. While the scene of Qur'an audition in the restaurant allowed Pexshan to voice the temptation to accept exile from a community that demands one kind of fasting of her, her accidental fasting of a different kind allows for a certain rapprochement that is fragile, uneasy, and uncertain. It provides texture for a moral world that is not constituted in agreement on rules or procedures but one that is marked both by abiding ambivalence and skepticism *and* a willingness to engage others. It is this kind of world in which the several properties akin to beauty bear the moral force they do for Pexshan: the beauty of Zoroastrianism, the prescient paradox of Khayyam's poetry, the beauty of statues, laughter and poetry that was marked off from the sorrowfulness of the Qur'an, and the dryness (*wushkī*) of her father's attitude.

This chapter has examined several “kinds of statements” (Wittgenstein 1958: para. 90) about the phenomena of beauty, placing each within the “enormously complicated situation of their utterance” (Wittgenstein 1938:I, para. 5). In doing so we traced some of the possibilities of beauty. First, we discovered the kinds of postures one learns toward beauty and the moral dimension of such a posture given the intimate relations that surround it. Second, we examined a scene of disappointment in which the normative conjunction of beauty and ethics within Islamic traditions failed to achieve their effect in a given life, pointing up abiding fractures within a community. Third, we saw how the normative Islamic practice of fasting became accessible only after it had been attached to the beauty of another religious tradition and filtered through the poetry that expresses a paradoxical relation toward Islam that was, again, sustained within the matrix of intimate relations. The method of tracing beauty through the occasions of its

appearance has not rendered a unified concept or experience of beauty that we might compare with the Kantian formulations. What these three scenes have shown are less the conditions or criteria for experiences of beauty, than some of the possibilities of beauty at the margins of Islamic traditions. Acknowledging these possibilities has required attention to the various kinds of learning, contestation, and transformation through which beauty enables ongoing—if sometimes fragile—relations with oneself, with intimate others, and with a broader community.

Better attuned to the work of Zoroastrianism in beautifying Pexshan's paradoxical fast, we might also better understand her attraction to Khayyam, to whom the following quatrain was attributed:

How long shall I flaunt this ignorance of mine?
How distraught by its confusion is this heart of mine!
I'll tie the *zunnar* of the Magus around his waist,
Why else? Since he's Muslim, that self of mine!¹⁰

¹⁰ "Zunnar" refers to the belt once worn by non-Muslims (e.g., Zoroastrian priest or Magus) in a Muslim polity. Though I benefitted from Nicolas's French rendering (Nicolas 1867:123), the English translation from the Persian is mine: *Ta chand kunam 'arze nadani khwish / Bigarraft dal-i man az parishan-i khwish / Zunnar-i moghana bar mayan khawham bast / Dani z cheh chiz, az musalman-i khwish.*

CHAPTER THREE

“Right now, I should go pray”: A Father’s Pleasures

Pleasures of Poetry

Let two scenes of savoring poetry’s pleasure provide a starting point for this chapter. Both scenes include conversations with a man whom I shall call Niyaz, whose sharing of his life with me provides much of the evidence on which this chapter’s argument shall rest. By recounting these scenes before identifying the primary problems of this chapter I ask patience of readers and promise in return a glimpse into the method of writing that has informed each of these chapters: how encounters in the field yielded intuitions of problems that become discernable only as I rendered fieldnotes into ethnographic prose, which then reorients a movement of discovery and return across texts of anthropology, philosophy, epistolary letters and others texts. Taking those texts as companions, I then return to the presentation of evidence in ethnographic prose to discern the appearance and transformation of a concept within a form of life.

A Reading

One night Niyaz and I stayed up late, closed up in his study while most of his family slept, reading and discussion two poems by Mahwy. Over the course of many months in which I came to know him, I heard him recite dozens of lines of poetry. Beyond his intimate familiarity with Kurdish poetry from each of the past four centuries, he was also an avid reader of Kurdish short stories and novels translated from European languages into Arabic. When I shared my confusion about a couplet of classical poetry, he often gave an insightful interpretation of a line, drawing upon his knowledge of Arabic language, Islam, as well as Kurdish folklore. That night as we discussed the poems line

by line Niyaz combed his memory, his imagination, and the interpretations (*sherh*) provided by the *dîwan*'s editors as footnotes. Though we continued to share fragments of poems and quiz each other on strange or difficult words, idioms, or images in poetry, that night was the first and last time we discussed poetry in such a structured fashion.

In speaking of suffering and inner pains, why don't I open my mouth?
Blood from a sorrowful heart billows from my breast to my mouth.

How it grieves me that like a child I take a flame to the page
Whenever I take a pen to write my heart's grievous tale.

As long as the tongue works, seize the chance for supplication today
The loose-tongued will be tongue-tied tomorrow when mouths are sealed.

Of the Real only "Real!" and of unreal I have always said "Unreal!"
Though like Mansur they kill me, I shall not leave off the Real.

Let the flower be set to the flame, let the nightingale become moth
Still I shall visit the garden and give the secrets of my heart to the wind.

"Tomorrow come to see my execution," I gave my word so many times
On trust in her lying word I won't give mine again—never again.

I said, "if you understood Mahwy's state, you wouldn't prey upon me so"
She said "he hasn't understood: I'm a fairy and he is a son of Adam"¹

The understanding of the poem that I reached in conversation with Niyaz is as follows:

The pain, sorrow, grief, and agony of Mahwy fill his chest like an ocean of blood that would spill out of his mouth if he began to speak of them. Whenever he takes up a pen to write of his grief, the grief is too much for the page to bear and it goes up in flames—who but a child would burn paper this way? Still he takes the opportunity he has while he is alive to beseech the favor of God since the Day of Judgment is imminent when the chance for supplication will pass and those who spent their words foolishly will be silenced. One who holds to the Truth (of "the Real") as desperately as Mahwy must be

¹ *Dîwanî Mahwy*, ed. Mudarris (1984:226)

prepared for a martyr's death like the one suffered by Mansur Al-Hallaj. The bitter prospect of such a death and the surging grief in his breast turn a beautiful flower into a flame: so the one who sang to their Beloved as the nightingale sang to the flower becomes a moth that perishes in the flame. Such a death was the Beloved's sweet promise, and so Mahwy prepared himself time and time again. Though he has learned not to lean on such faithless promises, he insists that his Beloved could grant him reprieve from his suffering. But their union is as impossible as a union between creatures of a nature so different as are humans from fairies.

The work of helping me to understand this poem was part of Niyaz's support for me and my research that he described on other occasions in many ways. In part it was a matter of hospitality to me, both as a foreigner in Kurdistan and as a guest in his home. In part it was a matter of what he called "national duty": that Kurds were so poorly understood outside of Kurdistan that it behooved him to work with foreign researchers to help redress this problem. In part it was a matter of friendship, as we grew to share many aspects of our lives with one another. But when we reached the end of the poem that evening and closed the *dîwan*, the first words Niyaz uttered invoked none of these things. It was with a sense of awe that said simply, *wallah xosh bu!* A colloquial way to translate this phrase is, "By God, that was great!" But attending to the sense of the Kurdish word *xosh*, we might better say, "What a pleasure!"

The Kurdish term *xoshî* may translate as pleasure. It is a general condition of being, as when upon making a new acquaintance, one may say, "I'm pleased to meet you": *xosh halm*. It is a corporeal sensation proper to touch, sound, taste, or smell (but not sight) as when delicious food, beautiful music, a sexual experience, or a beautiful

poem is described as *xosh*. Other experiences are broadly figured as *xosh*, such as a journey or an evening with friends or family. It can be a spiritual condition, as I have heard Ramazan described as a time of *xoshî*, as well as times of prayer or study. Of the dead, and especially of martyrs, one may say *xwa lê xosh bê*t, “may God be pleased with him/her.” Responding to Niyaz’s exclamation of pleasure at the end of our reading, an initial question for this chapter is: What kind of pleasure does poetry afford? Before elaborating on the import of this question, let us turn to a second scene that will provide greater depth and texture to the problem at hand.

A Recitation

The following morning Niyaz and I made a journey to the *bazaar* to take care of some business. Along the way we picked up a fellow whose name I didn’t record, so I shall call him here by the name that was often used as an affectionate address for an unknown male: Hama, an abbreviation of the common name Muhammed. Upon learning that I am interested in Kurdish poetry, Hama was eager to help, and his first question to me was: which poet do you enjoy (*ch sha’irêk hezt lêye*)? In emphasizing what I like or enjoy, he was asking me to speak from my heart (*le dlewe*) and also asking me not to make merely intellectual claims. I told him of my love for Mahwy and said that I see in his poetry a picture of life as an ongoing effort and struggle (*renc u hewl dan*) that was important to me. He responded by acknowledging the greatness of the poet, but said that he finds Nali more enjoyable. Nali predates Mahwy by several decades and belongs to the “Three Pillars of the Baban” (*sê kochkey baban*) who are popularly credited with initiating a revival of writing and literature in Kurdish, specifically in the Sorani dialect, in the first half of the 19th century. Following are some

excerpts of Hama's comments about Nali that emerged in conversation with me as we drove to the *bazaar*. Later that day I wrote down the prescient phrases that echoed in my memory, but I could not recall the precise sequence in which they occurred in conversation:

When he talks about his hucre,² you don't think it is possible for anyone to live there. And when he talks about a donkey, you don't think that a donkey and a human could be so similar, but then you understand what he is saying.

When I read Nali, I always learn something new: I learn some new words or I learn something about the world.

When I read Nali, afterwards, I see the world in a different way. I see more of the beauty of the world. [. . .] It's just like Sohrab Sepehri says: "Wash your eyes to see the world!"³

There is a lezzet [savor] in Nali! [Nali lezzetî tiyaye!] For me, it's very different from Mahwy. When I read Nali, I perceive a savor in it [chêjî tiya ebînm], but Mahwy is different, it works on your roh [soul] and your nefs [psyche/self], and it tires you.

Me, I am a dînî⁴ person [shexsêkî dînîm], I have belief and I pray, but for me, the most unpleasant conversation [naxoshrîn munaqesha] is a conversation about dîn. To a certain extent, I can talk about îrfan [gnosis] [here he was referring to Mahwy indirectly, since it is as a poet of gnosis that Mahwy is commonly known in Kurdistan], but if the conversation becomes too long, I'll be bothered [bêtaqet ebim].

As he said these things, there was a unique quality in his voice. Speaking of Mahwy, his voice was strained, he extended syllables and he spoke as if tired. But when he spoke of

² *Hucre*: the room of a mosque in which the programmatic study of all the religious sciences are carried out; it is often used as a metonym for religious education in general. Lovers of poetry in Kurdistan commonly recognize Nali's poem about his *hucre*. Even those with no taste for poetry commonly recognize the poem about his donkey that Hama also mentions.

³ From the famous poem "Sadaha-ye pa-ye Aab" (sound of the footsteps of water): "*Chashmha ra bayad shust, jor-e deegar baayaad deed*." "Eyes should be washed, [so that] there should be another way of seeing."

⁴ The term "dîn" is polyvalent, sometimes referring to Islam as *the* Religion, and sometimes referring to religion as a general category that includes Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and even Buddhism. It is also used in the Arabic phrase of Quranic derivation *yawm al-dîn*, to refer to the Day of Judgment, though that usage does not appear in this chapter. To retain the polyvalence of the term in my English translation below, I leave the noun *dîn*, and the adjective *dînî* (religious or Islamic) untranslated.

Nali, I heard enthusiasm and surprise in his voice and the cadence of his speech. The “savor” he perceived was palpable in his gestures, his tone of voice, the pace of his speech.⁵ Thus Hama here described (and performed) two contrasting figures of the mystical poet in Kurdistan. On the one hand, he described Mahwy as the kind of figure who makes your soul tired, who demonstrates great intellectual and spiritual strain, and who requires the same efforts of his readers. Hama associated Mahwy with ascetic discipline, self-denial, single-minded focus, and dedication. On the other hand, Nali appeared as a figure of discovery, renewed vision, pleasure, and savor. (There was another thread of that conversation in which Hama opposed two aspects of his religious orientation: he believed and prayed, but he found “conversation about *dîn*” tiresome and unpleasant. At the time, I was struck by the opposition between intellectual debate and a practical or passionate attachment to Islam. My understanding of that opposition in Hama’s speech later became the basis of an extended conversation with Niyaz about the nature of attachment and attraction to Islam in Kurdistan—to which we will soon return.) More than mere intellectualist pronouncements, Hama’s words were lodged as something between an argument and a plea to me. Kurdish poetry is not only about struggle and pain, but it is also about pleasure and joy.

After we arrived at our destination, Niyaz finished his business in the time it took Hama and I to drink a few cups of tea. Just as we stepped outside into the bright sun of Spring, Hama began to recite a poem that he finished just as we settled into the car that awaited us on the street corner:

Saî le perde der hat, camî sherabî hêna
Dî xîrema le hîret mahaftabî hêna

⁵ The two words that I have translated as “savor,” are the terms “lezzet,” derived from Arabic, and the Kurdish “chêj,” both of which often translate as “taste” or “(good) flavor.”

*Yek zere 'eksî prtew der kewtu turî sutand
Ayne sext ru bu lew 'ekse tabî hêna
Tîmarî chakî sinem rac' be chawî meste
Bextîsh mwafiqî 'eshq bo mn xrapî hêna
Yarm le andrun hat destî reqîb le desta
Xemnaku shadmanm rehmit 'ezabî hêna
Bo tobe suyî mescid hatm bchim le rêda
Bo koyî meyfroshan 'ezm shitabî hêna
Ruy her le mn deqoshê wa haliye ke Cibrîl
Her xase bo mnu ew ayey hîjabî hêna
Wey wey ch meclîsê bu dwênê le dîdew dl
Dlber sherabî gêra, Salim kebabî hêna*

The cupbearer came from behind the curtain and brought a glass of wine,
my awestruck heart from estrangement brought one like the rays of the moon.

A single gleaming ray appeared and burnt Mount Tur,
the mirror was polished clean and its reflection brought that ray.

The wounds of my sliced breast go back those misty eyes,
fate brought the terrible fortune of love to me.

My beloved came from afar with the hand of my rival in hers,
I'm now full of worry, now full of joy. Oh, mercy brought such agony!

I went down by the mosque to repent but there on the way,
to a group of wine-sellers I turned and made haste.

She covers her face only from me, she thinks that Gabriel
brought the verse on *hijab* exclusively for her and me!

Oh, what a gathering there was yesterday, in the eye and in the heart
that thief of hearts supplied the wine, Salim brought the kebab.

The poem was written by Salim (n.d. 35), another of the three “pillars” in the era of the Baban Emirate, who famously traded letters in verse with Nali describing the tragedy of the Baban’s crushing loss to the Ottoman reforms of the mid 19th century (Atmaca 2012). While he recited most of the poem, Hama admitted afterward that he had skipped a couplet or two in the middle—he didn’t have it all memorized. (I include the poem in its entirety above since even if he did not memorize it, he clearly meant to invoke its

entirety.⁶) The concluding lines of Salim's poem name the eyes and the heart (*dîdew dl*) as the sites of a joyful gathering or meeting between the Beloved (*dlber*) who bestows joyful intoxication and her Lover (Salim) whose heart becomes like kabob: ground to a pulp and cooked on the flame of love. According to Hama, Salim's poem was like the poetry of Nali more generally, and unlike Mahwy, in its exemplification of the pleasure of poetry. Hama's impassioned recitation performed that pleasure to the delight of his audience.

Understanding this recitation within the context of the conversation with Hama that preceded it foregrounds the second guiding question of this chapter: What is the ethical import of pleasure? Hama's comments made it clear that his ethical striving as a pious Muslim brought him pleasure. So too did the poetry of Nali and Salim. But when Hama stated that he was a "religious person" (*shexsêkî dînîm*) who believes and performs the required prayers, he was partly distinguishing himself from Niyaz and me. He had assumed (and rightly so) that the American researcher was not a Muslim, and he knew as well as I did that Niyaz was not devoted to the performance of the required prayers. The pleasure he took in poetry, he suggested, was congruent with the pleasure of prayer. If several studies have attended to the ethical import of poetry for the pious in Muslim communities (e.g. de Bruijn 1983) this chapter turns to the evidence of Niyaz's life, as another Kurdish Muslim who does not describe his ethical life as the pursuit of Muslim piety.

⁶ Hama also mentioned the poet Hemdî who had written a *texmîs* on this poem, which was also beautiful (*cwan*). *Texmîs* (the Arabic term *takhmîs* literally translates as "made into five") is a poetic form by which a poet adds three rhyming hemistiches to each couplet of another poem, resulting in the rhyme scheme: aaaAA, aaaBA, aaaCA, aaaDA, aaaEA, etc. (in which capitalized letters represent the original poem).

If my encounters with Niyaz and Hama produced an intuition of a problem, it was only in the process of writing—in part a process of sifting, separating, and recombining intuitions—that these two questions emerged into their distinct form. But how do they relate to problems of enduring relevance to anthropological inquiry? What promise do they hold to contribute to ongoing conversations about ethics and pleasure?

Ethics and Pleasure

Recent efforts to rethink the ethical dimension of social life have brought diverse intellectual genealogies to bear in moving beyond the depiction of ethics as the simple following of rules. Three threads in this effort deserve mention. One takes Foucault as a key interlocutor, who framed his later work in part as an inquiry into the forms of “ethical work that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one’s conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behavior” (1990:27). Several scholars have highlighted the Aristotelian genealogy of this concept of ethical work in accounts of particular communities, both where Muslims seek to inculcate in their bodies and souls the dispositions and tendencies proper to God-fearing attitudes (Mahmood 2004, 2012; Hirschkind 2005), and where non-Muslims engage in such work as the ethical “cultivation” of a virtuous self (Pandian 2009). A second thread is found in the work of Michael Lambek (2000, 2010) who seeks to articulate an “ethics of the act.” Resisting the turn to Foucault, Lambek lays out a different inheritance of Aristotle’s notions of “ongoing practical judgment” augmented by Roy Rappaport’s work on ritual and Hannah Arendt’s thought on human action. In claiming that the ethical is “intrinsic to action,” Lambek draws attention to the inherency

of ethical responsibility and obligation to all “action.” Though Lambek also claims an inheritance of Cavell, that inheritance is largely limited to the notion that skepticism and accountability accompany all action. Lambek formulates the notion (prescriptively), saying, “We must speak and act seriously and commit to the paths we have begun, to which we are held (and hold ourselves) accountable—and also recognize that full certainty and consistency are not possible” (2010:63).

If both of these threads emphasize the active dimension of ethical life, neither excludes a passive or receptive dimension. Among inheritors of Foucault, Talal Asad (1996) has emphasized the work of suffering in the making of ethical subjects, even when modern sensibilities recoil from that suffering. “Pain is not action but passion” (1996:1102). And Lambek’s essay twice draws attention to the fact that “action finds its compliment in passion” (2010:54), quoting Arendt to the effect that the actor “is never merely a ‘doer’ but always and at the same time a sufferer” (51). But the logic of these two approaches relies on the suppositions that what seems to be passive reception is in fact a form of active work, and that it becomes “work” in relation to an abstraction: “tradition” in Asad, and “criteria” in Lambek. Thus for Asad the self-flagellation practiced by Shi’a during Muharram shows “a *willing*, positive engagement with suffering” (emphasis added) that is a “collective rite of religious suffering and redemption.” In Lambek’s example, it was the “omission” of a rite of mourning in Indonesia that gave way to an “*act* of conventional acknowledgement” (57, emphasis added) in which the actor “redresses” her omission, demonstrating how “criteria for practical judgment are established and acknowledged in performative acts, while acts emerge from the stream of practice” (39).

A third thread, too, is attentive to the forms of work that make up moral striving in everyday life. Veena Das's account of a marriage between a Hindu and a Muslim in Delhi emphasizes how "each person in the family was trying to make slow shifts in his or her orientation to the divine, to prayer, and to ritual performances, as well as adjustments in the question of to which community he or she belonged" (2010b:392). But Das also attends to another dimension of ethical life (that resonates with Cavell's work) when she foregrounds the idea that moral striving may include a receptivity to the other in which one discovers unbidden attractions (399) and that it may take the form of questioning one's own wakefulness to one's everyday existence (397). (We shall soon return to the metaphor of wakefulness on a different register.) Thus in Das's account, the work of receptivity appears in a different light. The Muslim and Hindu lovers she cites describe their love as happening *to* them, saying, "I do not know how it happened but then I knew that she was the only one in the world for me," and, "Once I acknowledged to myself that I loved him, I thought that this [i.e., elope with him] is what I must do" (387). If the weight of normative criteria for engagement with different religious traditions was always present in this family, it was ongoing encounters between the members of the family that enabled the slow reorientation toward one another and toward religious traditions more broadly.⁷ Receptivity here is less the form of action than its condition, and receptivity occurs in relations with *others*—not only kin but also goddesses and wise men.

⁷ Das formulates the problem in another essay as follows: "The pressing issue becomes not what kind of virtues can be named and how they relate to an Islamic teleology but rather how do I relate, in this time and in this place, to those who are in my vicinity and with regard to whom I might never be in some kind of 'ideal' position of having clear-cut guidelines in terms of rules and regulations from my own religious tradition?" (2010a:233).

This reading of Das's essay is inflected with concepts that were the topic of more elaborate explanation in the work of Baruch Spinoza. Turning briefly to the concepts of passion and pleasure as articulated in the *Ethics* will enable us to return to the ethnographic evidence with a more clear view of the concepts that emerge there. For Spinoza, the essence or nature of any individual or "body" is defined by its capacities in relation to other bodies. No body exists in a vacuum, but only through encounters with other bodies do notions emerge that account for the relations of which each body is capable. Encounters always occur within a margin of difference such that degrees of power become perceptible. In any encounter, there are conditions of activity and passivity, the former when the nature of one's body explains the consequence of the encounter, and the latter when one's nature is only a partial cause, some remainder of which belongs to another body. According to this schema, in the kinds of social encounters with which our ethnographic inquiry is concerned, the sovereignty of the self that is required for an active condition seems unlikely. But passive states are of two types: one that decreases one's capacity for further thought and encounter, and one that increases this capacity. These states are not hidden from perception but present to it as affects: the affect that accompanies a decrease is *tristitia*, usually translated as pain or sadness; the affect that accompanies an increase is *laetitia*, which many translate as "joy," but Samuel Shirley calls "pleasure." Spinoza expands on these categories but for our purposes it will suffice to understand the concept of pleasure as it belongs to ethics in *Ethics*: Pleasure is the "joyful passive affection" that occurs when one encounters an other and as a result of that encounter, one's capacities for thought, action, and further encounter are augmented (cf. Deleuze 1990:239-246, 273ff; Duffy 2011, Kwek 2012).

Spinoza's thought is helpful for our inquiry for two reasons. First, the description of passivity resonates with the concerns of recent anthropological work on ethics while providing a robust concept to ground further inquiry on the line of thinking about receptivity to others that was opened up in Das's essay. Developing this line of inquiry is not an effort to argue against those authors who emphasize the active dimension of ethical life. It is rather an argument that the passive dimension of ethical life deserves more attention and that this passivity can be understood in terms of encounters with others rather than relations to norms, traditions, and criteria. Second, Spinoza's definition of pleasure provides a new starting point to think through the import of pleasure in ethical life. Although Foucault himself was keen to emphasize that in the Greek milieu with which he was concerned, sexual or erotic pleasure was merely one amidst a spectrum of other pleasures that included food, drink, and exercise (1990:114), most scholars have taken the critical study of pleasure as a critical study of sexuality. Though few take the pursuit of pleasure on the "primary operational level of the psychic apparatus" (Freud 2003:48)—and neither does Freud (48, 55, 61)—understanding the contingency of pleasure has not meant separating it from the primarily sexual or erotic aspect that was Freud's concern.

The scenes of pleasure in poetry with which this chapter opened provide little incentive to pursue pleasure in the domain of sexuality or eros, but they bear every indication that it is an ethical condition. Recall two of Hama's comments: "When I read Nali, afterwards, I see the world in a different way. I see more of the beauty of the world. [. . .] It's just like Sohrab Sepehri says: 'Wash your eyes to see the world!'" and, "When I read Nali, I always learn something new: I learn some new words or I learn

something about the world.” Notice that Hama describes states of transition or passage through which he becomes better able to see or perceive the world. The value of the poetry is not that it inspires a kind of action. Neither is reading or recitation presented as a kind of disciplinary practice (Cf. Messick 1997). Rather, some poetry inspires a kind of reception—a renewed capacity to relate to the world that further enables one to have new encounters with donkeys, hucres, or loved ones. Hama’s recitation seemed at once a performance of this renewal and an offering for his companions to receive that renewal as well. This transition is ethical insofar as it better equips him to encounter but it does not take the form of inspiring or encouraging work such as a dedication to ritual prayer—a work that Hama nevertheless values.⁸

The affect that accompanies the transition for Hama is pleasure. The *lezzet* (savor or flavor) that Nali bears is something that opens one up to the world and to further encounters. It is opposed to the tiredness that is brought on by Mahwy, which resonates with Spinoza’s description of sadness or pain: a decrease in capacity to encounter others. Furthermore—it is worth highlighting now since we shall return to this theme below—the kinds of encounters enabled are not necessarily interactions with other bodies in the present (e.g. donkeys), but they can take the form of figures that are imagined or remembered.⁹ The imagination of those scenes does its work on him, just as the figure of

⁸ In the same way that this chapter is meant to compliment rather than rebuff studies of ethical life that emphasize active dimensions, so it is meant as a compliment rather than a rebuttal of those studies of poetic practice that emphasize the role of poetry in performative “action” of strategic political design. Most notable among those studies are Caton’s (1990, 2005) analyses of political design *and* improvisation within poetic performance in Yemen, Gilsenan’s (1996) attention to how the poetics of speech in intimate contexts can produce political consequences that envelop an entire community, and Miller’s (2002) study of the expressive strategies by which female poets addressed Yemeni publics.

⁹ “The image of a thing, considered solely in itself, is the same whether it be related to future, past, or present; that is (Cor. 2, Pr. 16, II), the state of the body or the emotion, is the same whether the image be of a thing past or future or present. So the emotion [*affectus*] of pleasure, and of pain, is the same whether the image be of a thing past or future or present” (Spinoza 2002: 288).

Nali is often made present to his imagination. Hama's plea to me was that I, too, learn to see the pleasure in poetry.

In this light we can also better appreciate the exclamation that followed my reading of a poem of Mahwy's with Niyaz, *wallah xosh bu!*, "What a pleasure!" If the poem itself foregrounded struggle and pain—as I emphasized in reporting to Hama my love for Mahwy—its was also an occasion for a kind of pleasure. Pleasure then was a moment of relaxation after an encounter with the figure of a poet who gives renewed perspective on the world. But the texture of Niyaz's pleasure (like Serdar's desire and Pexshan's sense of beauty) only emerges in relation to others. To discern the texture of this pleasure, the remainder of this chapter examines the encounters with others that take place in the material world of his everyday life, as well as the imaginary world of that life. Each of the following sections of this chapter addresses the questions necessary to appreciate the ethical texture of Niyaz's pleasure in poetry. Who are the others in relation to whom passivity may be an ethical condition? How does Niyaz describe those relations and what is the import of pleasure there? What is the place of pleasure in the ethical traditions available to him? How does he describe his relation both to those traditions and to those pleasures?

The Pleasures of Family

Niyaz was around 50 years old, a businessman, a writer, a husband, a father of several children, a brother, and a son. He lived with his wife and children in a home where I visited them, on average, two or three days every month for about 16 months. The home was relatively large by most standards in Kurdistan. There were two bedrooms that the

children often shared according to gender. There was a small garden out front, along with a patio large enough to act as a garage. Niyaz once boasted of his ability to clean the entire patio with just a few liters of water—“a skill he learned from his wife,” she was quick to add, and he was quick to admit. Two large guest rooms each had enough floor space to accommodate a large plastic sheet around which more than a dozen people (relatives and friends) often sat comfortably for lunch or supper. There was also a television in each of those rooms. When there was sufficient electricity, both televisions were often turned on at the same time, accommodating different preferences: cartoons, news, sports, a Play Station, American films, or melodramas dubbed in Kurdish from Persian, Arabic, Turkish, or Korean.

Niyaz and his wife had met while both were at college in Baghdad. When I was shown a picture of them together in that era, I recognized the smile she often wore. In addition to an encyclopedic knowledge of folkloric tales in Kurdish, her culinary prowess was a common subject of our conversations. She often recited the preferences of those who lived in her household—this one never eats red meat, that one only eats the breast of the chicken, the other doesn’t like raisins on rice—and she soon learned my own preferences by watching me eat and ignoring my insistence that I found all of her cooking equally delicious, equally pleasing (*xosh*). When reciting these lists and pointing out how she accommodated various tastes, I began to think that she took as much pleasure in her knowledge and accommodation of these preferences as the rest of us did. Niyaz’s pleasure was clearly present when he would say to me with relish, *Andrew, jnm zor muhîme!*, “Andrew, my wife is remarkable!” then go on to praise her for her skills in homemaking, cooking, or remembering names and relations of the most distant kin.

Niyaz and his wife had known want along with most Kurds in the 1980s and early 1990s. But by 2000, Niyaz's business ventures had brought them financial security, which by 2008 had turned to relative wealth. This success also meant that Niyaz had a lot of free time. He spent that time reading and writing in his study, and investing in the overlapping worlds of journalism, publishing, filmmaking, literature, and politics. But Niyaz, his family, and his friends often remarked that he had a tendency to spend time at home that was unique among men. I often heard men of his cohort complain, *taqetî malewem niye*, an expression whose sense is approximated in the English sentence, "I can't stand staying at home." It evoked a picture of manhood or masculinity familiar to many in Kurdistan: that men get antsy (another way to translate *bêtaqet*) at home. Such an attitude could describe Niyaz's eldest son, who spent most of his time outside the house with his friends. But Niyaz did spend time at home, and I recall him describing his choice in this regard not in terms of obligation or necessity, but because *pêm xoshe*, "it pleases me."

Niyaz's youngest children spent most of their time near home when they were not in school, playing in and around the house. With these children I did a lot of playing, often turning into a lion or a bear or becoming the victim of such creatures. With Niyaz's encouragement, I tried to teach them some English through conversation, but his youngest daughter was a better teacher than I was. One evening after a particularly taxing session of such playing, his daughter sat on top of my chest as I lay on the floor. As if to explain the laziness of my response to her lion's roar, she declared to no one in particular in a tone I might describe as one of reprimand: *Andrew xewaluye*, "Andrew is *xewalu*." I didn't understand the word *xewalu* and I turned askance to Niyaz, who knew

immediately that I had not understood this word. A great smile came over his face and he declared in Kurdish, “Look how beautifully she speaks! ‘Andrew is *xewalu*’ means ‘he is sleepy.’ Maybe you haven’t ever heard that word, people rarely use it, but it is a beautiful Kurdish word!” Generous teacher that she was, the girl repeated her father’s definition lest I forget or misunderstand: “Andrew is *xewalu* means he is sleepy.” That his daughter had acquired such a vocabulary at such a young age fascinated and pleased Niyaz.

Niyaz often praised his youngest son in his presence for his good grades in school, his athletic prowess, his fine Kurdish, and generally for being clever. The boy usually responded with some combination of pride, embarrassment, and modesty, saying that he was still struggling with his English, or that however good his Kurdish was, he still couldn’t understand the Mahwy that his father and I loved, or the poems of Sheikh Reza Talabani. One evening I happened by a room where the son was hunched over the *dîwan* of Shex Reza that he had obtained from his father’s library. The boy answered my query by saying that he was looking for a poem that Shex Reza had written, but he couldn’t find it. Relishing the chance to repay my teacher by employing my fine-tuned patience in combing volumes of poetry in search of a single line, I found the quatrain for him later the next day. Sheikh Reza is known as the most accomplished Kurdish poet in the genre of *hcu*, or lampoon poetry. The ribald humor of the quatrain and its crass vocabulary brought us both to laughter—even though we were stumped by some of the vocabulary.

When I told Niyaz of the event, he acknowledged the appeal of this ribald humor to a teenage boy. Pleased as he was to see his son interested in Kurdish literature, Niyaz

refused the expectation that his son become the kind of intellectual that Niyaz was. That expectation he attributed to a “feudal mentality” (*‘eqlyetî derebegî*) by which sons inherit their father’s occupation as they inherit their reputation. But of his sons Niyaz said that he would be pleased if they found something that suited them, whether work as an engineer or as a traffic policeman.

The first time Niyaz took me to his home, I had gone to meet him at a poetry competition for secondary school students. As we left, he announced that we would go pick up his daughter from the college and he sent her an SMS to notify her of our arrival there. This was something that she required of him, he said with a smile, since she was embarrassed when he came to the college and started conversations with other students and teachers. By requiring this text message, she could be ready for him at the gate since in his words, which carried a tone of disappointment or helplessness, “she will not allow me to go in.”

Niyaz’s daughter seemed to enjoy the time she spent at home—even if this displeased her parents. Her mother once told me, after reflecting on the days when she was in college and went out with girlfriends, often near the company of boys, “We tell her to go out, spend some time with her friends, go to someplace nice (*xosh*), but she doesn’t go. She says, ‘These people are immoral’ (*em xelke bêaxlaqe*).” With the latter complaint, it seemed to me that the daughter registered her disgust with the prospect of being the subject either of the cat-calling that often afflicted girls in public, or of the rumors and gossip that would find fertile ground in her spending more time “outside.” By their encouragement to go outside, her parents proclaimed their trust in her discretion about where to go and whom to see, and they showed a dismissive attitude toward the

hyper-vigilance of what the girl had called “these people.” The sensibilities that developed in part through interaction with that hyper-vigilance were also discernable in the house, and in my relationship with the daughter. I spent enough time with the family in the house that others in the household came and went from the various rooms without attending to the formalities appropriate to guests—for example, that they not be left in the room alone for more than a moment, and that a male guest not be left alone with a female for more than a moment. When the latter occurred, Niyaz’s daughter sometimes left the room in what I sensed was discomfort at being left alone with me. But we frequently sat together chatting or watching television. I never discerned any pattern to the fluctuation between these two conditions.

One event stands out in my memory as indicating one aspect of the dynamic between Niyaz and his daughter. While sitting together with much of the family present one evening, Niyaz shared the prospective title of a piece of writing that he wanted to publish. Without giving the title, it will suffice to say that in it his daughter heard him contravening a central piece of Muslim doctrine. (It is one of the elements specified in a famous hadith in which the Prophet names the components of *îman*: “It is that you believe in Allah and His angels and His Books and His Messengers and in the Last Day, and in fate [*qadar*], both in its good and in its evil aspects.”) She turned her face toward him, scowled in disapproval and exclaimed ‘*aybe!*’, an expression whose effect in this case might be imagined through the English phrases “shame on you!” or “how dare you!” Within minutes, Niyaz relented and spurned the title. He later told me that his daughter’s disapproval was the sole reason for his resolution to change the title. When I suggested that his daughter’s reaction might be regarded as a predictor for how other readers might

respond to its title, he answered with frank disinterest in what other readers thought. His daughter's opinion was the most important. He then said with great affection and a smile on his face, "Have you ever seen a man so afraid of his own daughter?" There are several levels of reference indexed in this expression (Silverstein 2003) that make it a poignant, forceful phrase. A primary reference is the picture of a father-daughter relationship that can be discerned in Pexshan's descriptions of her father in Chapter Two: a man should fear nothing but God, but his daughter will learn to fear him.¹⁰ In the joyous tone in his voice, Niyaz made it clear that he relished the deferral or deflection of that picture of a father-daughter relationship, that in some register she "should" fear him, but things have turned out just the opposite. That a man fear his daughter in this way was something Niyaz saw as *teybet*, or special.¹¹

Niyaz's mother was frequently at home. He once told me, with a hint of irony, that she had been so pleased with him as a child when he went every morning to the mosque to pray and stayed much longer than was necessary that she had called him *nurani*, meaning "radiant one" or "illumination," in the spiritual sense of someone who stands in or reflects the light of God. The irony was that Niyaz no longer prayed, nor kept the fast, nor did I ever hear him explain his actions as part of an effort to be a proper

¹⁰ For more on this picture of father-daughter relations, as well as its correlates in relations between brother-sister and maternal uncle-niece and the way women navigate the forms of violence within and across these relations, see King (2008) and Hardi (2011).

¹¹ Michael Peletz (1995) has adapted Bourdieu's terminology of "official" and "practical" discourse to describe "views" of gender in Malaysia, the former being the hegemonic notion that reason belongs to male and passion to female, and the latter a counterhegemonic account that emphasizes male passion and female reason. The distinction is provocative, but from the point of view provided by my understanding of this father-daughter relationship, it is unclear whether the daughter's implicit appeal to Islamic discourse counts as hegemonic or counterhegemonic, and similarly, whether Niyaz's claiming to be a fearful father counts as counterhegemonic by its resistance to a common discourse, or hegemonic in its implication that "even fathers have no religious freedom when their daughters are so pious." I have highlighted the picture of fatherhood indexed by Niyaz's words, and the aspiration of his implicit in his rhetorical question. But given the uncertainty of what counts as hegemony in this milieu, I have chosen to use Niyaz's words (*teybet*, or special) rather than the analytic vocabulary of official, practical, and hegemonic, etc.

Muslim. Neither did he teach or exhort his children toward these things. Of course he would be quick to add that this does not mean he does not exhort them to be good people, and neither does it mean that his children were not “good Muslims.” I once spoke to his daughter at the beginning of Ramazan, and asked who in the household would be fasting. She said simply “all of us” but was taken aback when I bothered to clarify that the youngest daughter was not included in this since she had not reached the age at which fasting becomes required.¹² Then she said, as if it were self-evident, as it indeed it was: *bes bawkm . . . gwê nedat*, “Except for my father . . . he doesn’t tend to it.” The expression *gwê nedat* literally means “he doesn’t give an ear,” in the sense that he doesn’t listen, or tend to it. (Conversely, the common command *gwê meyere* means “don’t pay attention,” or “ignore it.”)

We shall soon return to Niyaz’s own descriptions of his relation to Islam, but for now I want to highlight the import of my own description of his relation to these others. Recalling Spinoza’s definitions and considering Niyaz’s regard for his wife’s hospitality and intelligence, his children’s linguistic prowess, and his daughter’s courage to reprove him out of her own conviction and fidelity to an ethical tradition, one can see the ethical dimension of Niyaz’s pleasure. In these scenes of ongoing encounter and engagement, Niyaz’s gesture was often a passive or receptive one in which he was surprised or impressed. His speech was full of descriptions of himself as acted upon, as one affected with what he called *xoshî*. With these descriptions of those relations in mind, along with his daughter’s description of his attitude toward religious duties (“he doesn’t listen”), let us turn to two conversations in which Niyaz offered some of his own descriptions of his

¹² The girl in question was several years younger than Serdar’s son, whom Serdar’s brother exhorted to fast in Chapter One.

relations to Islam, to his family, and to the ethical practices such as prayer and fasting that were alive in his home. To do so, I return to the conversation that followed our time with Hama described above.

Two Conversations and Five Figures

Islam in the blood

After we dropped off Hama, Niyaz and I were driving back to his home when he asked me what I was learning in my research. I let out a long stream of fragmentary thoughts largely inspired by Hama's distinction between an aspect of religious orientation that is intellectual and concerned with conversation, and an aspect that is practical and passionate. After talking for a few minutes and wandering to other topics in the conversation, I concluded by putting a question to Niyaz: Why do some people speak of religion as if it were only a matter of a creed, or an ideology that you could believe in or not? Why are some people surprised to find that Islam is still in their life—even their bodies—even if they don't believe? He spoke slowly and I scribbled quickly. He said:

Belief is like an apple: If you throw away one of them . . . the tree is still there! In our society, it has become like this: it has become a part of the system of ideas (afkar), so that even if you don't have belief, your ideas still have the same form/appearance (shêwe). You see, there are some beliefs that become a part of the conduct (sluk) of society. They become so widespread that they can't simply be pulled up and thrown out. When I die, they will bury me as a Muslim, and it's not in my hands at all, but it is the way things will be in the end. There is a system that is much bigger than me: all along in life, you think that you are using the system, but in the end, when you die and they bury you as a Muslim, you find that the system was using you! But this system was not built by one person, and so it cannot be broken by just one person. But I also have the belief that some things are decided about a person before they are born, and it becomes a part of their blood.

I said, "Please explain."

It's like eye color . . . what do you call it in English? Genes! The genes decide what color your eyes you will be, and I have this idea that thinking is the same way. If you have a hundred generations that are all Islamic, and then you take away a child from that, the Islam doesn't come to an end there.

I asked, "So where is the Islam?"

It's in the blood! Not even a hundred, if you have ten generations, who are all Islamic, and then you have a child and never speak of Islam to that child, Islam has existence in the blood of that child, and even if you never speak of Islam, it's difficult for that child to become a Buddhist. What is my point? My point is that being cut off from dîn is hard, it is difficult (da bran le dîn sexte, qurse). You can't say "it's over!" and have it over.

The world is a dînî world. Our entire understanding of the world is dînî. But if you look at history, until the time of Copernicus, everyone thought that the earth was flat [or, "the center of the universe," he might have said if he had had a science book before him]. There was no room for discussion. And when you tell them that it is not flat . . . [they say,] "How can such a thing be?! Kafir!" To say that you don't have any belief (bawer) is like saying you don't like apples: if you don't like them, it doesn't mean they will go away!

It is like meat in our bones: you can say that I will stop eating meat, but the fact is that for thousands of years of human history, this human body we have now, came to be this way because humans were eating meat! So [even] that body that doesn't eat meat was made of meat! Things don't come to an end so easily. . . . So when a man says, "I'm not Islamic" (Islam nim), it is still in the body (hêшта wecudî heye le cism). And I think that dîn is still a part of a part of humanity (insan). For thousands of years humans thought that it was God who sends us rain. Then one day we discovered it wasn't like that. But still, you see people praying for rain. Because this dîn is a part of humanity.

Niyaz here suggested that Islam cannot be given up merely through words. Of course, many esteemed Muslim scholars and poets in Kurdistan would claim that Islam can be given up, that one can become a *kafir* not only through one's words, but through one's deeds as well. We shall return to this point below when we consider some texts that explain this category. But at present we may acknowledge that the stakes for Niyaz were quite different than for those scholars. Niyaz's comments on Copernicus have exactly that effect of showing how the careless use of the term *kafir* can lead one astray: in

calling Copernicus a *kafir*, his detractors meant merely to insult him and so made themselves deaf to what he was saying. In order to hear what Niyaz has said, we should initially resist the kind of thinking that would ask whether he is a *kafir* or not. Niyaz was concerned with a mode of attachment to Islam that is not reducible to the categories of believer (*bawer hebun*, *imandar*, *dîndar* are the relevant Kurdish terms) or infidel (*kafir*), atheist (*mulhîd*), hypocrite (*munafîq*), or heretic (*zindîq*). Although these terms from legal discourse often circulate freely in daily life, Niyaz here drew my attention away from the evocation of legal terminology, toward the embodied forms of practice that make up ethical life.

The body was a key site at which Niyaz located an attachment to Islam. But this attachment was not the result of the active forms of ethical work that seek to cultivate embodied dispositions. Rather, Islam is in the blood, it is in one's genes; Islam produces "belief" in Muslims just as apple trees produce their fruit. Even if one does not desire its fruit, which is to say, even if one does not aspire to Islam, its fertility cannot be denied. Niyaz seems to say that for those born Muslim in Kurdistan, Islam is as much a given as is one's own body. Niyaz made these suggestions about Kurdistan in general and the sociological register of his speech is evident. But when we continued the conversation the following day, he reflected on his own life more explicitly.

Awake to Islam

The very next day, late in the morning, I sat with Niyaz in his study. Thinking of his statement the day before that "cutting off from *dîn* is hard, it is difficult," I asked him to reflect on his own life in light of that. "To what extent are you cut off from *dîn*?" I asked. He responded:

I see dîn as a beautiful novel . . . as a very important fantasy. If I read it as a story, then I benefit from it, I can see the depth of beauty and meaning. And if I read it as a story, I can also say that when it comes to stories, I can write stories as well as God can. Because really, that's what it is: the holy books are stories told by God. But the importance of those stories is that God creates a world using only words: only by talking and telling stories, he created a deep and marvelous world. I'm not talking about who created this world—that's not my problem—how it came to be or who made it—but I'm talking about the creation of a world through words. So because of this . . . it is not so important to me to say that I have quit Islam (wazm le Islam hênawe). I didn't decide that I will never fast, or that I will never pray. But I simply never felt that I needed to do it. I never had the feeling, "Right now, I should go pray." I think that these "ceremonies"¹³ have a relationship to this world, not to that world, not to another world or a next life. They have a relationship to society and your conduct (helsukewt) in society. They have a very, very important relationship to reputation (suma'), which is a great part of the symbolic capital (semay remzi) of a person in society. . . . [Here my notes say that they omit his speech about the two kinds of suma', one of them material, and another, more important kind, is symbolic. Then we returned to the consideration of prayer being about this world, not another one.] I don't put my hopes in another world, and when a person doesn't put his hopes in something, he won't work for it. Of course, prayer and fasting have a place in my family: my daughter prays and it is very important to her. And my wife prays and they fast [together]. But my family was not built on this, that I could say, "You should believe as I do." So God has existence in my family, and prayer has existence in my family. Here, there is an Islamic atmosphere (feza3êkî Islamî) that I am never opposed to (hergîz dîjî nîm). There are even activities (chalakî), which have existence in my life: when they fast, I help them and I eat with them when they eat, I celebrate the holidays with them, I visit the cemetery with them. If I decide to be against dîn (dîjî dîn), I should give up all of those things! I should say that there should be no prayer in my house. How could I? Those who say that they are dîn-less (bêdîn), they can't participate in anything: none of the rituals of society. If you become this kind of person, then you become a dark human (însanzêkî tarîk).

I asked, "So do you mean to say that you are without belief but you are not without religion (bêbawerît belam bêdîn nît)?"

Even to say I am without belief (bêbawer) . . . if I really didn't believe, then why not tell them not to bury me as a Muslim? I can say that, I can say that I am without belief (bêbawer) . . . but speaking is only a small part of the depth of human beings . . . and the activity (chalakî) is still there, even if I say with my mouth (dem) that belief (bawer) is not. I see depth in religion. That depth is very

¹³ Here Niyaz used the English term hesitantly, as if to test whether it was correct usage. I asked whether he was translating the Arabic word of common Kurdish usage *murasm*. He confirmed and I suggested that "ritual" is more commonly used for these activities, then our conversation moved on.

wonderful to me. The kind of person who has a spiritual conviction (qana'têkî rohî) in Islam is wonderful to me. Those kinds of men are Mahwy and Mewlewi and the great Sufis (tesewufe gewrekan). [Here he indexed several conversations we had had about great Sufi figures.] I kiss the hands of such a man. I kiss his hands because he has been able to put such a distance between himself and the filth of the world (pîzî dunya). He lives in a dialogue of the soul (diyalogêkî rohî). I have the conviction that dîn has no malevolence (sherr) in it at all, but in its depth, it is one of the greatest causes for the building of gentleness (hêmin) and forgiveness (lê burdî). Dîn is beautiful! But when? Dîn is beautiful when it is related to the individual, not when it is related to society (ke peywendî be shexsewe heye, nek ke peywendî be komelgayewe hebêt).

Here I told him that what he had said about speaking as only a part of what a person is, was very important to me. He went on:

You know, someone might say that the person who says he has no belief, and then he finds Islam in his life, he is a liar. But I don't believe in that. I don't believe that there is such a thing as lying. Humans are so, so deep, and speaking is such a small part of us. You've been to this room 100 times, haven't you? And still, you can't tell me what's in this room. You visit here, you even look at my books, but you can't close your eyes and tell me where everything is, and what I have, and the kind of bookcase. So how could you know a human being?! A human being who is a chest full of secrets (Sndukêkî pr le nihênî)! Maybe he tells me that he has never betrayed his wife: "I've never given even one kiss to a girl!" And he is right! But tomorrow, when he encounters a beautiful girl (tushî kchêkî cwan ebêt) . . . then what will he do? What can he do? It doesn't mean that he was lying . . . he was right! But now [i.e., in the encounter with the girl], he is right, too!

Then there was a long pause. Then he said:

Each human being has a part of all the world's religions inside of him. But only one of them has been awakened (yekêkyan be xeberî hênawe)! We all have a piece of Islam, a piece of Judaism, a piece of Christianity, a piece of Buddhism, but we only woke up one of those pieces. So the man who sees many pieces of dîn inside in himself, that is an important man.¹⁴

¹⁴ Niyaz went on to say, "But only part of Islam is awake right now: it is the part that hates Christians and Jews. Jews have done the same: they have awakened that part of their religion that hates the Muslims. And Christianity cannot continue without hating Muslims. I have one conviction, and I'll tell you about that: the revival of Christianity in America is based on hating Muslims, and without all the violence of Islam recently, this Christianity could not continue on."

Before drawing attention to some themes here, I want to suggest caution with regard to his comment that “*Dîn* is beautiful when it is related to the individual, not when it is related to society.” Crucial as it is to recognize the congruence of these words with secular discourse of privatizing religious experience, we must be careful to appreciate the sense in which Niyaz’s speech draws from other registers of thought and speech. For an example we need only turn to the second of the two poems Niyaz and I read together, where we find this couplet: “Of the old group of beloved friends, only two are left: / One a moth who shares my pains, one a nightingale who shares my striving” (Mudarris 1984:270). Here Niyaz valorizes the idea that the pain and striving of a mystic occur in isolation, away from the company of ‘society’ in a way that is not *simply* the function of a concept of belief as a privatized and individual experience—a concept acknowledged in different ways by Asad (2003), Taylor (2007), and Smith (1998) as distinctive of modern secularity. Indeed, as Asad suggests in a later essay on the terms of political engagement that crossed religious boundaries during the Egyptian revolution (2012), Niyaz’s speech explicitly draws us away from notions of supposedly individual or private belief as sufficient to the description of ethical life: “I can say that, I can say that I am without belief (*bēbawer*) . . . but speaking is only a small part of the depth of human beings.” If what interests Asad is how democratic sensibilities are mobilized in the face of impending crises, what Niyaz’s case requires is attention to the way an ethos of receptivity toward a range of *others* does not rely on a state of interior conviction rendered transparent in speech. On the contrary, it relies on the inscrutability of the self.

One prominent theme in his speech is that Niyaz did not characterize his relation to Islam in terms of active work. He did not claim an active disavowal and he said that

those who do actively disavow Islam force themselves into conflict with others. But he also made it clear that he does not actively take up the practices (e.g. prayer and fasting) that become a Muslim. The prescience of his phrase shows how he considered his engagement with prayer on passive rather than active terms: “I didn’t decide that I will never fast, or that I will never pray. But I simply never felt that I needed to do it. I never had the feeling, ‘Right now, I should go pray.’” And when he described the sense in which he does engage the ethical practices of prayer and fasting, it is as if he avoided the active voice in language itself. He said, rather, “There are even activities (*chālakī*), which have existence in my life.” Thus going to the cemetery and “helping” his family members when they fast look less like activity *per se* than passivity—as if it were life and loving relations who decided on these things, and they were taking him along.

Second, there is a general theme that intertwines the notions of wakefulness, attentiveness, and reception. The problem generated by the active disavowal of claiming not to believe is that it creates conflict with others. Once taken up, the active mode threatens to spiral out of control: if Niyaz were to make an active disavowal (of prayer, for example), then he would also have to make an active prohibition. Rather than his receptivity to the “the existence of God” and “the existence of prayer” in his house, he would become the kind of person who seeks to control others’ conduct by forbidding those things. Such a person is “dark,” Niyaz said, invoking the theme of perception and implying that people cannot “see” themselves. They are not necessarily “liars,” but dark people who have failed to understand the depth of the chest of secrets that is the self.

Niyaz most explicitly invoked the theme of wakefulness in his discussion of his attitude toward *dîn*, and we should dwell for a moment on his suggestion that “each

human being has a part of all the world's religions inside of him. But only one of them has been awakened.” There are several Prophetic *hadith* on the theme of wakefulness that are relevant to our discussion, the most common of which is that humans are asleep while they are alive and awaken at death. But when Niyaz spoke about the nature of humans in this way, the sense of his speech emerges most clearly if we consider a different *hadith* and a poem by the famous Sufi Ibn Arabi. The *hadith* is found in *Sahih Bukhari* (2:23:441):

No child is born except on *al-fitra* and then his parents make him Jewish, Christian or Magian (Zoroastrian), as an animal produces a perfect young animal: do you see any part of its body amputated?

The precise meaning of the *fitra* as “a kind or way of creating or being created” has been a subject of debate (see EI, v7, p. 932). But based on other conversations we had about this *hadith*, it seemed that Niyaz understood it to say that every human is, in its natural disposition at birth, a Muslim. It is only later that they are acclimated to another religion. When Niyaz said—in a tone of voice that displayed a keen awareness of the innovation of his speech—that every person has “a part of all the world's religions inside of him,” he did not mean that each human is born with an innate sense of God's singular unity (*tawhîd*), but that each human has within them a capacity for *each* of the world's religions. Though in Kurdistan it is not usually counted among the religions that recognize *tawhîd*, Niyaz includes Buddhism on his list. To claim that Niyaz was here “arguing against” this *hadîth*, or “going beyond it” or “lodging a claim” in relation to it would be unwarranted. These terms belong to legal debate, but Niyaz inaugurated his speech in a completely different register by considering *dîn* as a novel or a fantasy. Affirming a fantastic dimension of religious thought is one way he allowed it to affect

him. This is not because he thinks the question of religion's truth is irrelevant. It is his way of saying that "the depth of human beings" also includes a dimension of fantasy, and religion touches on that dimension. So perhaps another way to phrase his suggestion is that if one simply declares religion "true," then one overlooks the depth of humanity that belongs in fantasy. By the same token, one fares no better by calling "false."

The figure of "a man who sees many pieces of religion inside of him" also bears a strong resemblance to the following lines from Ibn Arabi's 11th ode in his *Tarjumat al-Ashwaq* (Translator of Desires):

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a
pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks;
and a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the
tables of the Torah and the book of the Koran.
I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's
camels take, that is my religion and my faith. (Nicholson 1911:67)

If we can hear Niyaz's suggestion as a note on a scale, then I am here suggesting that the notes of the *hadith* and this poem belong to the same scale. It is only in relation to these expressions that the poignancy of Niyaz's words make sense and one can see the subtle profundity of his expression. To be awake to the various world religions inside of oneself is clearly an ethical achievement, but rather than the work of "cultivation," receptivity is required.

For Niyaz, wakefulness toward the Islam within him is not only an acknowledgement of its presence in his blood. He mentioned how that wakefulness extends to his family, and there is a smooth transition in his speech between his disinterest in declaring to his family that he does not believe and the description of the "depth" that he sees in religion. Recalling Spinoza's definitions of power as a capacity to be affected, and of pleasure as an increase in capacities for further thought, encounter,

and affectation, we can understand how Niyaz's receptive attitude toward his family folds into his abiding attractions to figures of piety: "The kind of person who has a spiritual conviction (*qana'têkî rohî*) in Islam is wonderful to me. Those kinds of men are Mahwy and Mewlewi and the great Sufis (*tesewufe gewrekan*). I kiss the hands of such a man." Within much of the writing of self-professed "secularists" in Kurdistan, the gesture of kissing a great Sheikh's hand has come to indicate the peak of self-negation and submission to authority. So when Niyaz expresses his attraction to aspects of these men, he speaks quite clearly against this trend. But what kind of man does he speak of? What aspect of the ethical practices of the "great Sufis" attracted him?

Five Sufi Figures

The aspect that Niyaz identified as *qene'têkî rohî* was translated above as "spiritual conviction." But *qene't* also often borders on satisfaction—as when one says of a transaction that one is satisfied with its terms, or of an attempt to persuade someone that he was not satisfied with an argument. Yet another meaning is described at length in Sufi manuals as "contentment" (al-Qushayri 2007:175). *Roh* could also be translated as "spirit" or "soul," and so the term *qene'têkî rohî* could also be rendered as "satisfaction of the soul" or "contentment of the soul." But rather than this ostensive definition, I will provide some examples of the kind of Sufi figure to which Niyaz referred. Following are five fragmentary anecdotes that I offer in imitation of the style in which they were offered to me. They were provocative in part because they were decontextualized, as if striking suddenly from an elsewhere upon thought and experience.

(1) When Niyaz was young, he went to the mosque every day to pray. It was just he and a small group of old men who would go early in the morning. One day it was raining and when he arrived at the mosque his shoes were muddy. He took them off after entering the building, but before entering the inner room for prayer. The old

men saw that and they didn't say anything. When he came out again after his prayer, he saw that his shoes were clean. One of the old men had cleaned them for him without saying a word. Of this old man Niyaz says, "If all Muslims were like that, I would never have quit praying."

(2) As a teenager, Niyaz went to Baghdad for military service. Since the military barracks were filthy and miserable, he stayed at Mizgewtî Ghews. (Among the most famous mosques in Baghdad, this mosque has been a center of religious learning for Kurds for centuries. Of its namesake Abduqadr Geylani, Niyaz said, "Just as Shias speak of Imam Ali, so do the people of Baghdad speak of Ghews.") Niyaz learned a lot there, particularly from travelers who had come from India, Africa, or the Arabian Peninsula in pursuit of religious education and mystical practice. But he also lived in the fear that one day his head would be cut off. The cutting of necks, the eating of glass, and puncturing the body with skewers were common practices there at that time; they were counted as wonders that proved the power of God and the faith of the participants. Of his fear Niyaz says, "For them it was fine because they had faith. But what about me?! I had no faith!"

(3) There was a Sufi from Hamadan who had traveled to India. When he returned to Hamadan and took off his Sufi's cloak, he found an ant there. He sighed deeply and said, "I've taken this poor ant from its homeland." And he immediately put his cloak on again and started the long journey back to India.

(4) Junayd went to pray one day in the mosque. After the prayer, some of those who had prayed with him, and the imam, came to him and asked, "Junayd, you don't work, and you don't beg, and you have no wealth, tell us, how do you live?" Junayd replied, "Let me finish my prayer and then I will tell you." He went and prayed and then returned to the men. They were confused by the repetition of his prayer and asked him why he had done that. He answered, "It is clear that a prayer offered behind any imam who does not know Who it is that gives life to the servant of God is an empty prayer."

(5) Kak Ahmed Sheikh was sitting in the Great Mosque in Sleimani. There was a Jewish man who had been doing business in the area and he visited Kak Ahmed frequently. Kak Ahmed never interrogated this man about his religion. But one day one of Kak Ahmed's companions asked the Jew, in view of his moral character and his good relations with Kak Ahmed, why he doesn't become a Muslim. The Jewish merchant answered, "If Islam is what they [i.e. the people of the city] do, then I haven't a need for it. If it is what he [Kak Ahmed] does, then I haven't the strength for it."

Variations of each of the last three anecdotes are found attached to the life of Bayazid Bistami in Farid al-Din Attar's *Memorials of the Saints* (p. 193, 209, 205, respectively), a definitive work from the 13th century devoted to the biography of early Muslim mystics.

Even if the chains of transmission and transformation through which these anecdotes entered Niyaz's life and speech are largely opaque to me, this fact is important because it shows the historical reach of the anecdotes of mystical figures that are cited and recited on a daily basis in Kurdistan. While in Niyaz's version, several of these figures appear attached to the Perso-Arab tradition of mysticism, several are also attached to Kurdish history.¹⁵ We might gloss them by saying that these figures bear several characteristics: single-minded devotion to God; commitment to undertake the most strenuous tasks to prevent or redress misdeeds (travel to India); faith in the face of great risk to one's life (through swords and glass and skewers); a capacity for the most prescient, poignant speech (Junayd); an ability to inspire others toward the good through compassion rather than condemnation (his clean shoes); and a compassion that crossed the lines of distinction between different religions (Judaism, Islam) and different species (humans, ants). We might also recall an anecdote recorded by al-Qushayri: "Someone asked a Sufi, 'Who of mankind is most content [*qana'at*]?' He answered, 'He who is the most helpful to others, while being the least burdensome to them'" (2007:176). In sum, these anecdotes exemplify *qane'tî rohî*, satisfaction or contentment of the soul, and taken together they show the kinds of hands that Niyaz would kiss. Invoked in different ways on different occasions, these figures populated the landscape of Niyaz's memory and imagination, and we might understand his invocations of these figures as staging encounters, of the kind that open and sustain an ongoing attraction to aspects of the ethical traditions they exemplify.

¹⁵ In fact, in our discussions Niyaz often emphasized that even if the most innovative Sufis were not Kurdish (Ibn Arabi, Hallaj, Junay, Bastami, etc.), it was the Kurdish Sufis who were most important to him because, "they said the same thing, but they said it *for us*." These figures include Ahmedi Xani and Meley Cezîrî (from the 17th century), Mewlana Xalid, Melewi, and Mahwy (from the 19th century).

If in some locales, attraction to religion has been taken as an object of great suspicion and anxiety (Viswanath 2013), in Niyaz's case the acknowledgement of an abiding attraction to Islam is key to an attitude of receptivity that forms the texture of his relationship with his family. While Chapter One showed how abiding attractions are interwoven with anxieties about religious difference within families, and Chapter Two showed the term *kafir* came to be used and deferred in navigating those conflicts, this chapter has shown how that difference can occasion pleasure. This is not to say that the possibility of serious conflict is not present. That possibility appeared in one way in Niyaz's daughter's sharp reprimand concerning the prospective title for his writings. But in order to better grasp the paradox that subsists in his attraction to Great Sufis, let us turn to some of the texts written by those very Sufis. These texts are crucial to understanding the passive pleasures of Niyaz's ethical orientation for two reasons. First, they shall provide a preliminary but important glimpse into the role of pleasure in the ethical practices of pious Muslims. Through conversation with religious scholars, I came to understand that the concept of pleasure that I adduce from these texts is not isolated to the practice of "Great Sufis" of the past, but suffused throughout common pietistic disciplines of prayer and fasting in contemporary Kurdistan. Secondly, these texts articulate a perspective toward attitudes such as Niyaz's that is also readily available in contemporary life. How are pious Muslims enjoined to regard neglect of the ritual duties of prayer and fasting?

Two Texts on Pleasure and Prayer

One of the “Great Sufis” in Kurdistan is Kak Ahmedi Sheikh, who is renowned as one of the greatest figures of the Qadri *terîqet*. He was the proprietor of the “Great Mosque” in Suleimani for many years, and among his descendents is counted the nationalist icon Sheikh Mahmood, who led a rebellion against British occupation in the 1910s. Two volumes of Kak Ahmedi Sheikh’s letters were translated from Farsi into Sorani Kurdish by Mela Abdulkarim Mudaris and recently republished in an inexpensive paperback edition in 2008. The volumes are readily available in the bazaar and many Muslims in Kurdistan had copies in their homes—including Niyaz.

The eighth letter in the first volume is entitled by its editor, “Discourse on Not Praying,” and it may be summarized thus: Over the course of 16 pages, Kak Ahmedi Sheikh summons verses from the Qur’an, sayings of the Prophet, the opinions of the Prophet’s Companions, and writings from the great scholars of *shari’a* (Imami Henafi, Shafi’i, and Maliki) in order to describe the consequences of incorrect, neglected, delayed, or irreverent prayers. After apologizing to the recipients of the letter for his inability to address the issue in a personal visit, and reminding them of the way his father served them and therefore of their obligation to heed his advice, he begins by defining the problematic of the letter: “abstaining from prayer, or, prayer that is incorrect because it is not conducted appropriately or [because] it is done lazily, or [because] the proper times and occasions have not been observed” (149). After citing the Prophet to the effect that prayer is the backbone of religion (*kolekey ayne*), Kak Ahmed proceeds to mention a *hadith* in which it is reported, “the first group on the day of judgment whose faces will be blackened are those who do not pray” (150). Building on these and several other reports

from the Prophet, Kak Ahmed goes on to say, “Prayer is greater than any other requirement in the religion of Islam” (152). He then cites the position of the Companions of the Prophet by saying, “My dear brothers! Know that the condition of those who do not pray is so ominous (*shum*) and grim (*nalebar*) that some of the Companions of the Prophet [. . .] believed that anyone who intentionally, [or] for the simple shortcoming of laziness, omits a single required prayer becomes a *kafir*, unless he repents and returns” (153).

After stating that “the reason for not praying is that there remains in the heart of the one who does not pray no fear of God or of the greatness of God,” (156) Kak Ahmed proceeds to cite several *hadith* of the Prophet to the effect that one who intentionally omits prayers is a *kafir*, and that the difference between a servant of God and a polytheist is prayer. He finally states, on the authority of all these sources, and on several verses from the Qur’an that follow his statement, that not praying is a sign of a *munafiq*, or “that person who appears to be a Muslim but in his heart is no faith” (160). In the following paragraphs he goes on to say, “Oh my dear brothers! Anyone who is possessed of their manhood and of courage does not make their status into that of a *munafiq*, and they do not make prayers lazily or lackadaisically, but in joyfulness, delight, and with bright countenance they conduct [their prayers], just like one who goes to visit a king goes with appropriate manners and clothing and cleanliness” (161). The letter ends with an enumeration of the 15 punishments that await those who are of age and do not pray (five in this world, three upon death, three in the grave, three at the time of leaving the grave for judgment, and one upon judgment).

For our purposes, this letter is useful to give a sense of the import of prayer to Muslims in Kurdistan. Omissions of prayer open one up to the accusation of being either a *munaḥfiq* (hypocrite) or a *kafir* (infidel or apostate). According to Kak Ahmedi's letter, omission of prayer invites terrible punishments upon Muslims in this life and the hereafter. Furthermore, aside from its simple denigration of not-praying, the letter designates two other categories on the continuum of praying and not-praying. On the one hand, it considers those who omit prayers but repent as exempt from the status of *kafir*, showing that the conviction that one *ought to* pray is of primary significance, and only the stubbornly unrepentant are to be designated *kafirs*. On the other hand, it designates that category of those who pray properly as doing so with an attitude of "joyfulness, delight, and with bright countenance." In order to appreciate how this attitude of joyfulness—which we may consider a kind of passional attachment—is considered indispensable to the proper performance of prayer, and to a proper faith more generally, we may now turn to an '*eqîde* (creed) written by Mewlewi.

Briefly described in the Introduction, Mewlewi was also among those whom Niyaz mentioned as the "Great Sufis." Niyaz was fond of reciting anecdotes from Mewlewi's life, including the occasions on which certain poems were composed. Here I turn to the great treatise called '*eqîdey merzîye*, which we may translate as "The Accepted Creed." It is so called due to the fact that, when its author completed the '*eqîde* and submitted it to his *murîd* (spiritual master or guide) in the hope of receiving his approval, the latter had a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad appeared and said of the '*eqîde* that it was *marzî*, or accepted. Although Niyaz was surprised to see a modern publication of this '*eqîde* when I presented it to him as a gift at the end of 2009, the

volume is commonly read and referenced by students of the religious sciences who are concerned with the scholarly tradition of the Naqshbandî *terîqet* in Kurdistan.

The thoroughly annotated edition, published in Baghdad in 1988 by Mela Abdulkarim Mudaris and Fatah Abdulkarim Mudaris, contains 38 sections of varying length¹⁶, the second of which is entitled “Inquiry on Faith.” The seventh and eighth of this section’s 28 couplets are as follows:

*Le babî ‘ulum me’arîf hîsab
Niye, bo ch? Kathîr le ahli kîtab
‘arfu an khayr al munzarîn
rasul, wa qad kanu kafîrîn*

As concerns knowledge, understanding does not count,
Why not? Many of the people of the Book
“Knew that the Prophet is the best of those (Prophets) who give warning
but indeed they were *kafîrs*.”

The Mudarises devote almost five pages of prose to explaining these two couplets, the second of which is entirely Arabic. Their explanation rehearses several arguments about the relation between, on the one hand faith, and on the other hand knowledge (*ilm*) or understanding (*me’erîfet*) of Muhammad’s status as the true Messenger of God. Leaving out of our account much of the detail and complexity of these arguments in relation to the history of Islamic theology and philosophy (*kelam, felsefe*; cf. Renard 2004), we may take up a few lines of the Mudarises’ prose in which they argue that true assent (*tasdîq*)¹⁷ includes a passionate attachment.

(In the same way), as concerns the faith of profession and of the intellect, it requires only *tasdîq* (assent) and intellectual compliance (*îz’anî ‘ilmî*); that is to say, it only requires belief that the axioms are indeed the case—whether or not in

¹⁶ In a personal communication, Sheikh Muhammad Ali Qaradaghi reported that there were additional sections, or portions of sections, that were excised from the volume’s 1988 edition by editors at the Ministry of Awqaf in Baghdad. These sections dealt with problems of a sectarian nature (i.e., a very harsh criticism of Shi’a doctrines) in terms that were considered potentially inflammatory.

¹⁷ In translating *tasdîq* as “assent,” I follow Izutsu (2002:90).

one's heart one regards it with love or with hate—as when one believes that another has profited greatly from a transaction while in one's heart, one is annoyed and agitated by that profiting. But *tasdîq* according to *shari'a*, requires—along with *tasdîq* and intellectual compliance—a practical compliance (*iz'anî fi'li*), which is to say, to *love it with one's heart and be delighted by it* [*emphasis added*], and also not to do something that would be contrary to it or a negation of it, or even resemble [lit. “smell like”] neglect of it; in the same way, it is also necessary for whoever has faith in their heart both to utter the *shahada* and announce their own faith.

Thus according to these commentators on Mewlewi, true faith requires four aspects.

First, it requires an intellectual kind of agreement, proper to the realm of knowledge and understanding, with the axioms of the *shahada*. That agreement should be borne out in three other aspects: by the tongue, in uttering the confession and announcing it to others; by one's practice, in not acting contrary to the truth of those axioms; and in the passionate “love” and “delight” that one feels in one's heart. While Niyaz's statement that he does not “feel the need” to pray or fast should not be conflated with the pleasure that the heart takes in acknowledging its faith, they do show two complimentary aspects of passionate attachment in Islam. That Niyaz so clearly acknowledges the absence of such a passionate attachment—as regards prayer and fasting—puts him in danger, then, of the accusation that he lacks faith altogether. The dangers of such an accusation (some of which are described in Chapter One) did not escape Niyaz, but the accusations were not, to my knowledge, actualized.

This brief foray into just excerpts from a vast tradition of debate and contestation in Kurdistan on the topics of prayer and pleasure has been important to clarify two dimensions of the ethical life that Niyaz shares with his family. First, it should be very clear that pleasure is not conceived as a “transgression” against religious norms.¹⁸ On the

¹⁸ For this reason it may be helpful to distinguish Niyaz's ethical orientation with the picture of “transmutation,” “invention,” or “creation” of values that Deleuze discerned in Nietzsche. On that view,

contrary, the discussion about proper place of pleasure within a regime of ethical practice has been a point of deliberation and discussion among scholars and lay Muslims. While Hama's explicit associations of religious practice and poetic pleasure make this apparent on one level, its appearance in textual traditions confirms the wider availability of such attitudes. Just as Niyaz does not locate a moment in time in which he decided not to pray, we cannot locate the point at which the pleasure of prayer is transfigured and becomes the pleasures that Niyaz treasured in poetry, in Sufi figures, and in his relations with his family. It was a slow transfiguration by which one arrives at the condition where one can say, "I never had the feeling, 'right now, I should go pray.'"

Nevertheless, Kak Ahmedi Sheikh's text was necessary to highlight the availability of a discourse on the spiritual status of those who have reached that condition. Pexshan's brother drew on that discourse by calling her a *kafir* in the course of a heated debate in Chapter Two. In light of the availability of this discourse, the two occasions of his daughter's speech cited in this chapter promise insight into a different dynamic between Niyaz and his daughter. While we may not suppose her to have abandoned the prospect of invoking that vocabulary, she once chose to describe his attitude as "not attending" or "not listening" to the duty of fasting.¹⁹

On another occasion, it was a sharp reprimand (*'eybe!*) that had sufficed to register her offense, in the face of which Niyaz quickly withdrew. So if the letters on the

"The creator of values cannot be distinguished from a destroyer, from a criminal or from a critic: a critic of established values" (Deleuze 1983:87; cf. Nietzsche 1954:27, "On the three metamorphoses"). While criticism and creativity are essential to ethical life for Niyaz, his attitude of reception and attraction to aspects of the established values stands in stark contrast to the attitude of a "destroyer."

¹⁹ We may emphasize here a methodological distinction between our procedure in Chapter One and that of this section. For the former, the effort was to track the connections across different registers of mystical and everyday life in the life and speech of Serdar, waiting for him to make those connections himself. In this section, the goal was to show the availability of a discourse that is *not* brought to bear on everyday life. (If Chapter One tracked connections, this section identifies and highlights a disconnect.)

neglect of prayer on the one hand show the gravity of the accusations to which Niyaz is vulnerable when his passive attitude leaves him unmoved to pray, on the other hand they also shed light on the active dimension of the subtle gestures through which his daughter was calibrating the discourses she invoked in her engagement with him. We shall return briefly to this dimension of activity below.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a description of two scenes of encounter that animated an inquiry into the concepts of pleasure and passivity. Acknowledging recent work in anthropology that has highlighted the active dimensions of ethical life, we examined the gesture in Das's work toward a notion of receptivity as framing ethical engagement in everyday life. Elaborating this notion of receptivity through some ideas of Baruch Spinoza, we then returned to accounts and descriptions of the life of Niyaz. There we saw the effectiveness of receptivity at work in several registers. Toward his children he was receptive to both the simple pleasures of life and the moral reproof proper to their piety. Toward the family more generally, he was receptive to the performance of religious duties and even joined in on such occasions as visiting the cemetery. In his speech, these forms of receptivity came alongside his abiding attraction to the Great Sufi figures. The moral excellence of these figures as rendered in the anecdotes about their lives continues to appear in scenes of encounter enacted in the realm of imagination and memory. It is in this light that I suggest we also understand the initial pleasure of reading poetry: the poem itself is an account of the poet's active ethical disciplines and assumption of the suffering required on the path to achieving virtue. But in the virtual

presence of such a poet through reading, Niyaz's exclamation "what a pleasure!" (*wallah xosh bu!*) registers his receptivity to that ethical work. Or in the terms he later offered, it shows wakefulness toward Islam. In contrast, the person who professes disbelief becomes led to actively denounce belief in others. Closing oneself to such encounters, one becomes, in Niyaz's phrase, "a dark human."

As unattractive as such a dark human is to Niyaz, neither does Niyaz espouse the transparency of the self, held out in the light, as it were. He made this clear in his exclamation, "A human being [. . .] is a chest full of secrets!" On the one hand, one may discern a dark skepticism toward others in this, as if Niyaz were cautioning against trust and anticipating rupture. This is expressed in the scene of the man who boasts of never having kissed another girl, then finds himself facing her. Perhaps it was a similar skepticism in which Niyaz sometimes regarded the religious activities of the pious in sociological terms as part of their "symbolic capital" in society. But on the other hand this expression also folds into the scene of a man who disavows Islam and then finds it after all. Perhaps, then, Niyaz is also imagining a scene in which he wakes up to find more Islam in himself than he knew. And perhaps that openness and receptivity is what inspires the careful calibrations of his daughter's speech to him: the hope that he will one day feel, as he has not for some time, "right now, I should go pray."

CHAPTER FOUR

“To Mend What is Torn”: The Letters of Mawlana Khalid Naqshbandi

A Possible Genealogy

In each of the preceding chapters I have sought to demonstrate how poetry in contemporary Kurdistan animates intimate relations characterized by religious difference. This chapter carries that concern forward by turning in two new directions. First, I turn toward a more distant past, taking up a collection of epistolary letters written by one of Kurdistan’s most prominent Muslim scholars and Sufis, Mawlana Khalid Naqshbandi. Second, within those letters I turn toward a set of relationships that are characterized by a different kind of religious difference. If the first three chapters examined the difference between pietistic Muslims and Muslims who are “otherwise,” then this chapter examines relationships between pietistic Muslims who share a kind of pietistic striving in common. This striving includes not only efforts for the unambiguous fulfillment of all duties required by the *shari‘et*, but also the supererogatory disciplines of a Sufi path, or *tariqet*. Despite this commonality between correspondents, though, the fragility of relations is highlighted by several factors. These include the moral failings common to relations that are accentuated by political interest, sectarian tendencies, and the simple fact of geographic distance. This chapter treats the letters of Mawlana Khalid as a response to the threats of such separation. Given the fact of absence, how can written correspondence sustain companionship and inspire Muslims to strive along the Sufi path? What kind of language is suitable to this task? What were the limits and possibilities of language in this exchange of letters?

My argument is that poetic fragments, and poetic language more generally, are indispensable to the task of sustaining relationships under the threat of separation. This argument emerges from a close reading of the letters, portions of which I present in translation here. In making this argument, I take up as companions for thinking some permutations of the ideas about desire, beauty, and pleasure that were developed in previous chapters. In Chapter One I discovered that it was particularly human experiences of desire and its failure that made the idiom of divine desire (“God as lover”) inhabitable for Serdar. In Chapter Two I found that Pexshan’s capacity to perceive beauty told her what kind of striving she was capable of. And from Niyaz in Chapter Three I took a challenge to begin thinking about the reception of pleasure as an axis of ethical relations among intimates. If with a different twist, each of these ideas will reappear this chapter.

In taking these concepts as companions for an investigation of Mawlana Khalid’s letters, I do not mean to suggest that contemporary Kurdish Muslims who often shirk their religious duties have derived their way of living from Mawlana Khalid’s precedent. While many claim affinity and attraction to Mawlana Khalid (recall that Niyaz said he would “kiss the hands” of such men), my concern is not to authorize or evaluate those claims. Nor is this chapter an exercise in demonstrating concrete historical links between the early 19th and early 21st centuries in Kurdistan. However, I find that the companionship of these concepts enables a unique analysis of letters that explicitly entreat attachment to Islam as a discursive tradition carried by the lineage of scholars and embodied through the rigorous disciplinary practices of a Sufi path. So my task is to point out a resonance between these two domains that suggests how certain aspects of

Mawlana Khalid's practice of epistolary correspondence may be understood as a possible genealogy for the work of sustaining intimate relations among Muslims of different persuasion in contemporary Kurdistan. Here I take the notion of a "possible genealogy" from Naveeda Khan's (2012) study of religious life in Pakistan, where she suggests that contemporary practices of religious debate and disputation in Pakistan may be understood as inflecting and refracting some of the principles of Muhammad Iqbal's thinking, which he inherited from Henri Bergson. Discerning the resonance of some Bergsonian ideas in the writings of recent religious scholars, Khan develops the notion of a "possible genealogy" as a mode of resonance that is less concerned with direct historical descent than with the partial echoes or overlap between ideas or practices that may otherwise seem incompatible. In this sense, insofar as their poetic language enables ongoing relationships in the face of the threat of separation, Mawlana Khalid's letters are part of a possible genealogy for the capacity of poetic fragments to animate intimate relations marked by religious difference in contemporary Kurdistan.

A crucial link in this possible genealogy is the generations of Muslim scholars that connect Mawlana Khalid to the present through Sorani Kurdish poetry. As a part of his efforts to renew Muslim striving in the early 19th century, Mawlana Khalid composed a short creed (*'eqîde*) that summarized the principle tenants of Muslim faith and practice. While such creeds had long been written in other Islamicate languages and in other dialects of Kurdish, this creed is among the first remaining examples of prose written in Sorani Kurdish (Mele Kerîm n.d., Mihemed 2004). In the years following his death, with the courtly support of the Baban Emirs in Slêmanî (Atmaca 2012), Kurdish scholars began to compose poetry in the Sorani dialect (according to Persian rhyme schemes, see

Introduction fn. 1). They also continued to compose in Arabic, Persian and Turkish—sometimes within the same couplet—as their Kurdish predecessors had done. The poets who wrote in the Sorani dialect from the early 19th until the early 20th century are now called the ‘classical’ school. Among those poets are Mahwy, whom Serdar loved so deeply and whom I read with Niazy, Nalî whom Hama exclaimed renewed his vision of the world, and Salim, whose poem Hama recited to me so passionately. Another of the most famous poets was Kurdi, whose poetry is less well-known in contemporary Kurdistan and has not appeared in the preceding chapters. The following two couplets from a poem by Salim frames the relationship of these poets to Mawlana Khalid:

On the day of the match I saw them face off, Lover and Beloved:
Servants of the arts (*huner*), they came as a team in the sport of Love
On one side were Nali and Mahwy, on another side Salim and Kurdi
[But] in the path of the arts they were [all eager] supplicants of Mawlana (35)

If competing against another on the field of love to produce the best poetry in Sorani Kurdish, all four of these poets were “supplicants” (*tikacu*) of Mawlana Khalid. The parallelism between the poets’ gesture of supplication, and Niyaz’s gesture of kissing the hands of the Great Sufi figures is one kind of resonance that belongs to a possible genealogy. We shall explore other kinds of resonance below.

The Language of Epistolary Correspondence

My focus on the connection between intimate relations and poetic language contributes to ongoing conversation in Islamic studies about the work of language in Sufi thought and practice. Collections of letters, usually called *maktubat*, have been preserved and studied as an integral component of Muslim intellectual traditions. Scholars have often turned to

these texts for historical research into the lives of Muslim scholars. In some cases letters are among the most important source of knowledge about a particular figure both in terms of the doctrine of their teaching and as a record of their practice. Such is the case for several figures within the lineage of Sufi Masters through which Mawlana Khalid traces his connection to the Prophet: the ninth-century Baghdadi Sufi al-Junayd (Abdel-Kader 1976); the 14th-century namesake of the Naqshbandi, Baha al-din Naqshbandi (Parsa 1975); the 15th-century scholar associated with its rising popularity in Central Asia, Khwaja ‘Ubayd Allah Ahrar (Gross & Uraunbaev 2002); and the towering figure who revived the *terîqet* in South Asia at the turn of the 17th century, Ahmad Sirhindi (Buehler 2011; cf. Friedmann 1971, Haar 1992). For these and other figures, research into the *maktubat* has allowed scholars to elucidate the evolution of doctrine over time, as well as the social and political contexts within which such doctrine took shape.

While each of these studies acknowledges the specificity of a letter as a transaction within an ongoing relationship, few have sufficiently attended to the language of the text as itself lending texture to the relation that it sustains. In claiming that a text lends texture to a relation, I do not only mean that broad doctrines are often “personalized” to the distinct needs and capacities of a given addressee.¹ Rather, what interests me are the dimensions of correspondence that do not initially seem to belong to the category of “doctrine” or “practice,” but are often consigned to the category of “greetings” or “literary flourishes.” These include expressions of longing, praise for the addressee often written in rhymed prose and fragments of poetry. The identification of this dimension of letter writing is often linked to a dismissal of the “literary” as irrelevant

¹ For a thoughtful treatment of this dimension of written correspondence, See Paul Jackson’s (1980) study of the letters of Sharafuddin Maneri.

or ornate. So this chapter takes up the often-neglected question of the role that the language of letters itself plays in sustaining relationships that suffer the threats of separation.

A dismissive attitude toward the language of correspondence in rendering and establishing the texture of a relationship is not only visible in Western scholarship but has a strong place within Muslim intellectual traditions as well. Typical of this attitude is the following passage in which Samer Akkach (2010) describes the views of ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nablusi.² Akkach notes that Al-Nablusi’s views on the style appropriate to written correspondence changed over the course of his life, but one view is expressed fairly clearly in his travel memoirs:

The letters ‘Abd al-Ghani cited in full in his travel memoirs were clearly of the genre he identified as “literary correspondence” (*murasalat adabiyya*). This type is characterised by exchange of compliments presented in flowery language ornamented with poetry and rhymed prose. The letters he received from his disciples, for example, were meant to show the deep affection they had for their beloved master and how badly they missed him. It took shaykh Sh’udi six pages of tightly spaced prose and some fifty lines of poetry to convey this simple message. Clearly, such letters functioned as a currency of social interaction and were appreciated and entertained for their literary quality. Beyond the social and literary purposes they served, they were, as ‘Abd al-Ghani put it “of no benefit and inconsequential.” For this reason, ‘Abd al-Ghani dismissed literary correspondence as having little merit, and expressed a preference for “religious correspondence” (*murasalat shar‘iyya*), in which he followed “the approach of past generations in offering guidance and support in matters of religion.” (27)

If such a distinction between literary correspondence as merely “ornament” or a “function of social interaction” and religious correspondence yields great insight into Al-Nablusi’s views of human language, this distinction should not be taken for granted as a universal feature of the *maktubat*. If this chapter is partly concerned with what Akkach glossed as

² Known in part for his efforts to integrate the thought of Ibn al-Arabi into Naqshbandi practice before Ahmad Sirhindi’s revival marginalized that thought (von Schlegell 1997:137; Le Gall 2005), Al-Nablusi was a prolific scholar whose writings Mawlana Khalid cited in his own letters (Mudarris 1979: 343).

“social function,” I take the text of the letters themselves as offering insight on how the language of the letters relates to the kind of social relation it produces between correspondents. I shall argue that when we attend to the texts of Mawlana Khalid’s letters, a very different picture of language emerges—one that denies a separation between the literary and the religious.

This method of looking to the texts of the letters to find a “picture” of language relies on the fact that the letters themselves frequently tell us what letters are capable of doing. What linguists have identified as a metapragmatic discourse (Silverstein 1993), happens in Mawlana Khalid’s letters in many ways: letters frequently acknowledge that a letter has recently arrived, or complain that it has been too long since any letter arrived; they specify the proper procedure, attitude, or language for writing letters; mention the circumstances that made letter-writing impossible; or allude to truths that cannot be mentioned in letters. Most importantly for my purposes, Mawlana Khalid’s letters frequently describe the effects that a previous letter has had on their addressee. Through a careful study of these descriptions, this chapter renders a picture of the work of language within the written correspondence of Mawlana Khalid.

Mawlana Khalid’s correspondence belongs within the epistolary genre of *insha*. The historical roots of this genre are traced to the chancellery function of the early Islamic Caliphs (Hachmeier 2002), and reached what many scholars consider its height in Persian empires of the 11th through 14th centuries (Mitchell 1997). Colin Mitchell (1997, 2003, 2009) has recently drawn attention to the fluorescence of *insha* in the Safavid period. Even as it was largely imitative of previous models, Mitchell claims that during that period “*insha* was understood as a creative literary genre which allowed

extensive use of rhetorical and rhyming devices; in this sense, *insha* is very much a hybrid vehicle of creative expression which appeared in state correspondence and personal missives” (2003:487). It was this genre’s trait of “personal missive,” complete with rhetoric and rhyme, that Mawlana Khalid inherited and developed in correspondence with his contemporaries. The task of analyzing in further detail Mawlana Khalid’s distinctive place within this tradition is an important one but I must leave it to scholars better acquainted with the historical breadth of the genre. My inquiry is directed toward a discrete number of texts that contain a rich commentary on what language does in epistolary letters. Through a close reading of these texts, a fine-grained picture of language will enable further comparative study.

Although I have described the letters as personal, and many pertain to relations that I call intimate, this should not be mistaken with the notion of a communication as “private.” On the contrary, the presence and persistence of the *maktubat* as a resource for study meant that writers of letters always accounted for the plurality and sometimes the unpredictability of an audience. Not only might a letter be read aloud to a small or large group, but it also could be copied or passed on beyond its addressee. Furthermore, the composition of letters was often a shared task that distributed composition, dictation, and writing unequally among different parties. So these “personal missives” were also eminently “public” texts.

Mawlana Khalid

The Sources

This chapter introduces a new perspective to the study of Mawlana Khalid in two ways. First, in simplest terms, sources: while scholars have necessarily been attentive to the *maktubat* as a precious resource for knowledge about Mawlana Khalid's life (Abu-Manneh 2001; Algar 1976; Hourani 1972; Foley 2005, 2008; Weismann 2001) they have usually read only the Arabic letters that were first collected in the decades following Mawlana Khalid's death by his disciples Muhammad Ibn Sulayman, Muhammad al-Sahib, and Muhammad al-Khani (Weismann 2001:29). While I have consulted some of these Arabic sources for reference, I rely on the edition of Mawlana Khalid's *maktubat* published in two volumes by Mele Abdulkarim Mudarris in Baghdad in 1979 (Mudarris 1979). In addition to 91 Arabic letters that seem to be drawn from the previous editions, this volume also includes 194 letters in Persian that have not yet (to my knowledge) been cited in any scholarly study in English.³ This edition is in common circulation in Kurdistan-Iraq. It sits on the book shelves of many *'ulama* and was recently translated into Sorani Kurdish (Feteh 2009, Berzencî 2009) on the occasion of an international conference devoted to Mawlana Khalid. Drawing from both Arabic and Persian letters of Mawlana Khalid, this chapter puts forward a new understanding of his epistolary activity.

A "Socio-Religious Movement"

Second, studies of Mawlana Khalid have generally been motivated by the desire to understand the social and political influence of the *terîqet* before and after his time. This has led scholars to emphasize what was new and distinctive about the Naqshbandi-

³ This edition is the basis of Mu'tadami's study (1988) that corrects many typographic errors and provides Farsi translations of some Arabic texts. Helkewt Hakim's (1983) PhD dissertation at the Sorbonne draws selectively from the Persian letters.

Khalidi *terîqet* as a “socio-religious movement.” This approach draws in part from the way that the adherents of the Naqshbandi Mujaddadi understood themselves. In his letters Mawlana Khalid is fond of citing the path’s eponym Baha al-Din Naqshband, saying “whoever ignores this path, his religion is in danger” (e.g., Arabic Letter 4), and Mawlana Khalid certainly regarded the Naqshbandi as a superior path of Muslim aspiration. (This accords with the understanding of the Naqshbandi that Arthur Buehler [1998, 2003, 2011] reports in South Asia following the revival of the *terîqet* by Ahmad Sirhindi—that it understood itself as the quickest, most reliable and efficient of the Sufi *terîqets* in delivering those who properly adhered to its disciplines to the domain of felicity in which their lives accord with the model of the Prophet Muhammad.) This approach is further warranted by the rapid pace of the Naqshbandi’s growth during and after Mawlana Khalid’s lifetime, among common Muslims as well as Ottoman elites (Abu-Manneh 2001:73–114). And finally, differences between the Naqshbandi and other *terîqets* have been analyzed in view of the conflicts that emerged with other *terîqets* such as the Qadri (Atmaca 2012:93–178, Jafar 2006). I describe both of these facts in greater detail below. In sum, a scholarly emphasis on the distinctive features of the Nashbandi as a socio-religious movement is well founded and has been productive.

However, emphasis on the Naqshbandi as a socio-religious movement has tended to overlook important aspects of the material and temporal process through which authority was constituted within the *terîqet*. Here I want to make two points. First, the locus of authority within the Naqshbandi-Khalidi *tarîqet* was not Mawlana Khalid. The locus of authority was the Prophetic example as handed down by the lineage of masters.⁴

⁴ While this fact may seem self-evident to scholars familiar with Sufi *terîqets*, its neglect in many studies has led to statements that leave great margin for erroneous interpretation. For example, “More than any of

Second, if one acknowledges this fact then Mawlana Khalid's own authority cannot be taken for granted, but we must ask how he placed himself within that lineage, how he was able to persuade others of his place within that lineage, and how he was able to sustain that place even when he himself lived in a constant state of geographic *displacement*. My argument is that the *maktubat* themselves give us a picture of these processes, but first I want to provide two examples of the way that these processes have been regarded by scholars approaching the Naqshbandi-Khalidi as a socio-religious movement.

First, consider the explanation that Abu-Manneh (2001) offers for the novelty of Mawlana Khalid's method of initiating disciples into the *terîqet*. The tradition of initiation into the Naqshbandi path had required a long period of companionship with a master. Mawlana Khalid himself had spent a full year in the companionship of his master Ghulam Ali in Delhi. Ghulam Ali, in turn, had spent 15 years in companionship with his sheikh before receiving initiation (p. 29 fn. 3). But Mawlana Khalid began to initiate disciples into the Naqshbandi path after a short and intensive 40-day period of seclusion. In his hypothesis for why Mawlana Khalid chose the quick initiation over the long period of companionship, Abu-Manneh reasons:

Sometimes years passed until [an initiate] could have passed through his spiritual training and acquired [. . .] the affiliation to the order. Not everybody could have done that except the chosen, the few who could have afforded the time, the determination and the persistence to reach. In this manner the order would not have spread fast enough and would have remained limited to a small number of followers. If this was good in the eyes of former shaikhs it was not so for shaikh Khalid. (30)

its antecedents, the Khalidiyya was the creation of its eponymous founder, Diya' al-Din Khalid" (Weismann 2007:85). As this chapter makes clear—and as the rest of Weismann's studies demonstrate—Mawlana Khalid did not understand himself to be “creating” anything, nor did he ask his disciples to view him as a creator. It was not creation but renewal that was central to Mawlana Khalid's mission. The sobriquet he assumed in some of his letters made this clear. He called himself “the renewer of the Ottoman age” (*al-mujjaddid al-zaman al-othmani*). That title was itself a rhymed derivation of the title that had been given to his predecessor, Ahmad Sirhindi: “the renewer of the second millennium” (*al-mujjaddid al-alif al-thani*).

Abu-Manneh goes on to suggest two reasons for this innovation. First, because Mawlana Khalid led an itinerant life in which he quickly moved from place to place, it was impractical to require long periods of companionship. Second:

He felt a strong urge for a quick expansion of the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi teachings as he understood them. Such an expansion could only be achieved by a large body of deputies. Indeed, through the device of [seclusion] he was able to do that as well as initiating very many followers all in a relatively short time of about 16 years. A great achievement by any standard. (31)

In other words, shortening the period of companionship before granting initiation allowed for the expansion of the *terîqet*. Without any discussion of the goods internal to the practice (for example, acquiring the virtue of humility—which appears Mudarris’s account [1979: 30ff] of the time that Mawlana Khalid spent carrying and distributing water while in companionship of Ghulam Ali in Delhi), the modification of that practice is taken as a key feature of Mawlana Khalid’s novelty with regard to the Naqshbandi. Furthermore, without entertaining the possibility that Mawlana Khalid might have felt that requiring any more time in companionship would be a burden to aspiring Muslims and might stand in the way of their gaining access to the disciplines and fortunes of that path, the shortening of the required period of companionship is presented as a simple matter of rational expedience. I shall return to this hypothesis below.

In a complimentary effort to explain the wide appeal of Mawlana Khalid’s teachings during his day, Sean Foley includes among relevant factors that the 19th century was a time of great transformation rooted in “technological change” that “radically altered both the outlook and lifestyle of ordinary people” (2008:532). He goes on to describe a need to “mediate between their ancient local identities and the economic,

social, and political norms of the new globalizing human community” (533). Finally, Foley argues:

Ironically, the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya *tariqa* was especially well equipped to meet the needs of Muslims in this new milieu because of Shaykh Khalid’s doctrines that little really changed in the world and that Muslims’ belief in otherworldly powers, including sainthood, remained the only truth path to salvation. (533)⁵

The problem with this explanation is not merely its misrepresentation of Mawlana Khalid’s views,⁶ or its simplistic portrayal of his disciples as looking for stability in a time of change. Nor is the problem with Abu-Manneh’s explanation just that it is conjectural. In fact it may be correct after all. The problem with both of these explanations is that they overlook the process of persuasion that was required to establish the legitimacy of Mawlana Khalid’s practice as authorized by the preceding Masters. That is, the relevant question is not how Mawlana Khalid gained authority over a mass of followers; the question is how Mawlana Khalid was able to persuade Muslims that he had submitted to the authority of Prophet and to the lineage of Masters that connected him to the Prophet, and that they could obtain the same connection by association with those Masters.

If we want to attend to this process of persuasion, then the *maktubat* is a rich resource for understanding the heart of Mawlana Khalid’s aspirations. While there are important passages that indicate both his doctrine and his strategy for expanding the *terîqet*, there are many more passages that are devoted to the task of sustaining

⁵ Foley again writes: “Khalid argued that Muslims had forgotten that very little changed in human history, and the present moment is nothing but an illusion generated by Satan and *dunya*.” (2008:535).

⁶ First, belief in the power of an otherworldly sainthood would not accomplish salvation for a Muslim unless they were also willing to live in accord with the model of the Prophet and struggle along the Sufi path (see my discussion of Persian Letter 188 below). Second, Mawlana Khalid’s view was not that “little” had changed in the world, but that too much had changed since the time of the Prophet, so Muslims had to struggle mightily to renew and restore that model (see below, Arabic Letter 42).

relationships with friends and followers, and keeping those relationships (to borrow an idiom from the letters) “under the watch of the high chain of Masters [of the Naqshbandi].” Much more than novel practices or strategies for expansion, the letters speak to this process of sustaining relationships in the face of threats of separation. And rather than simply a man who wanted to maintain control over his followers, we find a man whose authority was constituted through expressions of his receptivity and his capacity to be affected by the letters of his companions and disciples. Before taking up the letters, I want to introduce Mawlana Khalid through a short biographical sketch that shows both the kinds of relationships he developed in the course of his life and the particular threats of separation that plagued them.

A Life

Geographic separation from intimates was a reality for Mawlana Khalid during much of his life. He was born in the town of Qaradagh in Kurdistan in 1776 and began his education in the *hucra*. During the first 10 of years of his life, the Baban Emirs founded the city of Slêmanî as the new seat of their power.⁷ As was common for ‘*ulama* during that period, Mawlana Khalid left his home town and studied in Slêmanî and other cities before receiving his license (*icaze*) at the age of 20 in Sinne.⁸ He received an appointment to teach in a mosque in Slêmanî around 1800 and undertook the Hajj to Mecca in 1805. By 1808, though, the quest for knowledge that had inspired so many ‘*ulama* set Mawlana Khalid on the road again, and this time he traveled to Delhi. There,

⁷ During Mawlana Khalid’s life the Baban Emirs were usually allied and subservient to the Ottomans, but periodic Qajar interventions were a key strategy for those in the Baban family who sought to compromise allegiance to the Ottomans (Nieuwenhus 1982).

⁸ Known beyond Kurdistan as Sannandaj, Sinne was the seat of the Ardalan Emirate, whose relation to the Qajars mirrored in many ways the Babans’ relation to the Ottomans.

in 1808, Shah Ghulam Ali (also known as Abdullah Dehlewî) inaugurated him into the Naqshbandi path and bid him return to Ottoman lands.

Mawlana Khalid arrived in Kurdistan in 1811 and continued teaching, but left briefly for Baghdad in 1813, where he met the Heyderi family (Abu-Manneh 2000:17), to whom we shall return below. Upon invitation from the Baban Emir Mahmud Pasha, Mawlana Khalid returned to Kurdistan in 1813 (Atmaca 2012:110). His teaching then became so popular that the British traveler whose diary is a key resource for knowledge of events in this period reported that Mawlana Khalid had amassed 12,000 followers by 1820 (Rich 1836:140). (Among those followers was Osman Beg, the brother of Mahmud Pasha, to whom we shall also return.) But his popularity and the novelty of some of his teachings in the Kurdistan region aroused the enmity of the city's most senior scholar affiliated with the Qadrî *terîqet*, Shiekh Ma'ruf Nodê (who also shall reappear). This enmity involved assassination attempts (Edmonds 1957:77) and the manipulation of Baban authorities, who eventually forced Mawlana Khalid to leave Slêmanî in October 1820 (Rich 1836: 320). He spent the next few years in Baghdad, then moved to Damascus, where he died in 1827. The condition of ongoing separation from family, friends, disciples, and teachers was the very condition of possibility for written correspondence that connected Mawlana Khalid with intimates in Mecca, Istanbul, Damascus, Baghdad, Basra, Slêmanî, Erbil, the Hawreman region in Kurdistan, Sannandaj, Tehran, Delhi, and others.⁹

⁹ The letters of the *maktubat* do not indicate that couriers of an organized postal system delivered them. On the contrary, the letters often acknowledge the receipt of a letter and identify the person who delivered it—usually a *Mela* who was also travelling in pursuit of knowledge. Persian Letter 85 reprimands its addressee for pausing in his journey because a letter that Mawlana Khalid entrusted to him had been stolen. Mawlana Khalid insisted that he continue on his journey to Delhi and deliver orally the contents of the letter according to the best of his ability. Alluding to political authorities, Mawlana Khalid wrote, “As for why the letter was lost, it is clear that some worldly power took an interest in it.” The addressee's having

If geographic separation from his intimates was a definitive feature of Mawlana Khalid's living, there was another kind of separation that is qualitatively different and not directly a consequence of geography. This was the abiding threat that Muslims would become separated from the exemplary practice of the Prophet Muhammad and his lineage of scholars, saints, and descendents. To illustrate this, I begin with a fact on which scholars agree: Mawlana Khalid regarded the Wahhabi movement as a great threat to the unity of the Muslim community.¹⁰ Though it had not gained much prominence in Kurdistan, Mawlana Khalid requested in some letters that he be kept informed of their activities. Scholars report that it was during the Hajj season of 1805 that Mawlana Khalid witnessed the Wahhabi siege of the Haram in Mecca. Here I rely on Itzhak Weismann's (2001) summary of the problem posed by the Wahhabis. In a discussion of a prayer prescribed by Mawlana Khalid for his followers, Weismann explains the phrase "devastate the innovating heretics and the accursed Khawarij" as follows:

The term Khawarij is directed, undoubtedly, at the ultra-orthodox Wahhabi movement, which in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century openly challenged the Ottoman government, conquering the holy places in the Hijaz and terrorizing Syria and [southern] Iraq. The Wahhabis rejected the erudition of the *'ulama* as based on blind imitation within the framework of the *madhhabs* [i.e., schools of legal thought] rather than on the *Qur'an* and *sunna*, even more so the practices and teachings of the Sufis, regarding them as innovations and superstitions. Moreover, on the basis of these views they charged all Sunnis except themselves with disbelief (*takfir*), leaving their lives and property open to attack. (53)

Weismann's account draws our attention to an important fact. To state simply that the Wahhabis were opposed to the Naqshbandis misses the point. The point is that the

stopped en route to wait for Mawlana Khalid's directions is testament to the fact that he could not take for granted the equivalence of written and oral communication.

¹⁰ That agreement is clear among Weismann (2001), Abu-Manneh (2000), Atmaca (2012), Foley (2005), and others. As Atmaca recounts (2012:96ff), scholars disagree on if and how Mawlana Khalid regarded Shi'i Muslims, Jews, and Christians as a threat to the community: Atmaca (2012:96) agrees with Foley (2005:70) that Algar (1976) and Abu-Manneh (2000) and Hourani (1972) exaggerated Mawlana Khalid's sentiment against these groups.

Wahhabis rejected the authority of the lineage of scholars on which the Naqshbandi depend. So Mawlana Khalid's opposition to the Wahhabis is rooted in his own commitment to uphold the model of the Prophet as it was handed down through the lineage of scholars. To deny the authority of that lineage was to deny the integrity of the Muslim community as Mawlana Khalid understood it. His posture toward the Wahhabis was pronounced antagonism and enmity. But this also informed his posture toward other Muslims since it demanded a renewed effort to sustain the authority of the Prophet and the lineage of scholars. While followers of Mawlana Khalid would compose treatises to attack the Wahhabis (Wesimann 2001:56–80), Mawlana Khalid's preferred mode of undermining the Wahhabis was to ground his own practice and that of his disciples in the authority that the Wahhabis denied.

In this regard, the Wahhabis are symptomatic of a more general kind of separation that threatens the Muslim community in other ways. Beyond the organized movement of the Wahhabis, other factors threatened the Muslim community with disorganization. These included the spreading of rumors (which Mawlana Khalid explicitly names as a factor in his expulsion from Kurdistan in 1820), the unfounded objections of *'ulama* to Naqshbandi practices (such as their disapproval of the practice of *rabita*, which we shall consider below), and the simple chatter of detractors (which threatened to discourage his followers in Sinne, as we shall also see below). Threats also included innovations of various kinds, as attested by Mawlana Khalid's complaint (Arabic Letter 42) that he would never had gone to Damascus if he had known about the "excess of innovation" (*kathirat al bid'a*) there, which left him in "sorrow and anguish" (*huzn wa milal*). So while geography posed one kind of threat of separation, rumors, detractors, and unlawful

innovations accentuated this threat. It is within this fragile context that written correspondence becomes a precious resource to sustaining (and mending) relationships.

The following four sections of this chapter offer a close reading of passages from a few letters. I am guided by the overarching problem of how the language of the letters constitutes Mawlana Khalid's participation in the authority of the lineage of the Naqshbandi scholars, and how that participation is shared with his companions and disciples through the letters. Occasionally turning to the concepts of desire, beauty, and pleasure to illuminate these letters (as part of a possible genealogy for the moral force of poetry described in the first three chapters), these sections address four questions: How does the language of the letters provide a medium for reconciliation after conflict? How does the materiality of language—its imbrication with sound and scent—in the letters address the problem of separation and enable the ethical aspiration proper to the Sufi path? How do the letters confront the limits of language in communication? And, what is the ethical status of the kind of receptivity toward beauty described in letters?

Reconciliation

In separation, offense becomes difficult to mend. Disagreements can simmer and relations can turn sour. But letters can offer reconciliation. There are several letters in the *maktubat* in which Mawlana Khalid replies to such letters of reconciliation. His replies often contain expressions of full forgiveness. Consider two examples, both of which address his expulsion from Slêmanî. In a letter addressed to Sheikh Ma'ruf Node,¹¹ Mawlana acknowledges receiving letters and oral reports from the Sheikh's

¹¹ Sheikh Ma'arif Node was also father to Kak Ahmadi Sheikh, who won Niyaz's admiration and whose letters we considered in the previous chapter.

emissaries in which Sheikh Ma'aruf acknowledged the wrong he did to Mawlana—including the spreading of rumors and written accusations of infidelity (*kufir*)—that led to his expulsion from Slêmanî. Mawlana Khalid makes it clear that the injury in these wrongs was not simply to him personally but to the Muslim community when he writes that these accusations “provoked some of the common disciples (‘*awam al-murîdîn*) to mad carelessness and to excessive controversy.” Sheikh Ma'aruf Node had written to beg forgiveness, and requested that Mawlana Khalid offer that forgiveness in the form of a letter. After specifying what exactly he is offering forgiveness for,¹² Mawlana Khalid says of Sheikh Ma'aruf Node's desire for reconciliation that it

pleased me exceedingly, and for this blessing I gave thanks to God on high time and time again: thanks be to him who transformed conflict into agreement and brought the conditions for union after such a long period of separation; may God on High preserve us in this intention and grant us peace according to his munificence (Arabic Letter 52).

While that statement is itself written in rhyming prose, in another passage Mawlana Khalid makes it strikingly clear what the beauty of language has to do with the prospect of reconciliation. The following sentence contains three rhyming phrases of parallel meter that I'll emphasize in parenthesis: “You requested the delivery of a letter (*irsal al-maktub*), you gave an example an example for us of the most beautiful request (*ihsani matlub*), and we want to answer it in the most eloquent of styles (*ablaghi aslub*).” This shows that Sheikh Ma'aruf's letter was itself beautiful, and its beauty impressed Mawlana Khalid with the need to answer in kind. This rhyming seems to perform the

¹² Though he names several offenses in this portion of the letter, it is interesting to note that at its conclusion Mawlana Khalid includes a poem that makes clear the difference of this reconciliation from a confessional model that would purport to purge one by naming everything. “And beyond this is much more subtlety / but what conceals is better and more beautiful than that.” The model of forgiveness here is not expiation (cf. Reynolds 2012), but hiding, concealing, covering, as when wrongdoing is hidden by God's mercy.

very act of reconciliation: as two men move from disagreement to agreement, so words begin to harmoniously echo one another. Of course, as is the case with rhyme, it is difference that makes that harmony possible, since Sheikh Ma'aruf has not abandoned his own Qadri path to take up the Naqshbandi. So the reconciliation effected here is not one of undifferentiated unity, but a way to live in a Muslim community where difference persists.

Another letter of reconciliation (Persian Letter 163) is addressed to Osman Beg, the brother of Mahmud Pasha whom Sheikh Ma'aruf had provoked to expel Mawlana Khalid. It is unclear how long their conflict had lasted, but Osman Beg had written a letter of reconciliation to Mawlana Khalid. In his reply, Mawlana Khalid opens with a couplet from the Persian poet Salman Savoji:

For the heart of one who doesn't know, separation is not even a straw of hay
For one who knows all, it is like the peak of Alwand.¹³

Mawlana Khalid goes on to say that upon returning from a journey to the Hijaz he found a letter from Osman Beg that had a strong effect on him. He writes, "From recalling the beautiful thoughts of that dear friend, the oceans of longing began to churn such that I knew not what to say or what to write." Mawlana Khalid goes on to offer his forgiveness, writing, "Of all manner of neglect, our mind is cleansed, and concerning everything that was done or said against us—whether moles or mountains, from drops to oceans—you and both of your wives and both of the emirs are forgiven." Then Mawlana Khalid closes the letter with a quatrain that addresses the theme of separation:

If we remain alive then we'll mend it
the shirt that by separation was rended.
And if we die then forgive us, pray!
. . . so many of our desires are buried this way . . .

¹³ Alwand: the high and daunting peaks of a famous mountain range in central Iran.

While both subjects may hope for the reunion of embodied companionship, the reality of death frustrates many hopes, burying them alive, as it were. The poem brings the work of the letter to life. From the separation of enmity and injury, this letter moves Mawlana Khalid and Osman Beg into the domain of that separateness that is the condition of all ongoing loves. The texture of that relationship is not simply the smooth unidirectional command of a sheikh over his disciple. It is rather like an article of clothing that has been torn and mended.

If these two letters of reconciliation show the work of poetry and rhyming prose in mending relations, then a third letter will show how reconciliation may depend on a kind of eloquence. Following is the complete text of a letter (Persian Letter 152) whose addressee is identified only as “a disciple”:

After a long period of silence and neglect, and moreover of great confrontation and the affliction of the downtrodden, two words of peace-making arrived. As much as I have considered how to reply to you, dear sir, I find there is nothing else to be said except for the two lines of Nizami Gangi. Therefore I limit what I have to say to what he has said, and that is:

That is not the face I know as yours
Nor is that a heart I would call unfaithful;
But I am bothered by your immature conduct
So what shall I call you at last?

Whoever is coquettish and proud and authoritative and yet assumes to belong to the place of humility, it is hard to conceive how, in the end, his work might come to anything but naught. Hafiz says:

In this place, only broken hearts find buyers
The marketplace of vanity is on a different path

This poor fellow did not take up that dear one [as a disciple/*murid*]¹⁴ in order that you know yourself as better than the Masters of the Inner truth and that the elders of the lineage (*salsala*) be bothered with you. And Peace be upon you.

¹⁴ Among relevant generic conventions of the letters are that the addressee is often referred to as “that one” or in the third personal plural. Conversely the letter writers refer to themselves as “this one.”

There had been a conflict between Mawlana Khalid and the disciple. A long time had passed since the disciple had written to Mawlana Khalid. At long last he did send a letter that contains some gesture of “peace-making,” but Mawlana Khalid is not appeased by the gesture. In light of Mawlana Khalid’s willingness to reconcile with both Sheikh Ma’aruf Node and Osman Beg, his response to this disciple seems all the more harsh. While the other letters of reconciliation contained acknowledgement of the beauty and effectiveness of the letters Mawlana Khalid had received, this one identifies two features of the disciple’s letter: First, it is marked by arrogance, pride, and vanity, which leave Mawlana Khalid uncertain whom he is addressing and unable to facilitate correspondence. In order to know whom one addresses, thus, correspondents must not simply feign but in fact belong to the *dar al-mazla*—the place of humility—and be among those of broken hearts (*shakast-e dil*). Second, Mawlana Khalid very subtly indexes the disciple’s lack of eloquence in addressing him when he says “two words” of peace-making arrived. If there is a fine line between brevity and paucity, Mawlana Khalid here decries the disciple’s letter for its paucity. Tellingly, while humility is expressed and required in the beautiful couplet by Hafiz that Mawlana Khalid quotes, it is arrogance and vanity that is betrayed by the paucity of the disciple’s letter. Without calling him a *kafir* (infidel) and without expelling him from the Naqshbandi *teriqet*, Mawlana Khalid asks rhetorically, who are you? How can I go on with you whom I don’t know? In this letter, the separation effected between Mawlana Khalid and his disciple is not described in terms of a doctrinal or political difference. While it may well be the case that the disciple persists stubbornly in some practice that Mawlana Khalid

regards as an illicit innovation, that fact is not addressed in the letter. What makes their relationship unsustainable here is the texture of a language that projects arrogance.

In the texture of eloquent language in his letter, Mawlana Khalid was able to discern a desire for reconciliation with Sheikh Ma'aruf despite their disagreement on what were the best practices for Muslims. Although it had been torn by separation, Mawlana Khalid was able to mend the garment of desire for Osman Beg's companionship through a few poems that point to that desire. But in the letter to the unnamed disciple, it is because they cannot find a language in which to know one another that the arrogance brought out the destructive force of separation.

A final letter addresses a kind of separation within the Muslim community that does not need to be reconciled and so shows how the threat of separation is less something to be overcome than something one learns to live with. Mawlana Khalid acknowledges that within a community of Muslims of different orientation, there will necessarily emerge those who decry others in an agonistic bid to lay claim to a superior path of Muslim striving. In a letter to his followers in Sinne (Persian Letter 151), Mawlana Khalid begins by addressing the problem of how to respond to detractors. It seems that his followers have written a letter to request advice on how to deal with this matter. We can infer little else from Mawlana Khalid's reply about what exactly the inhabitants of Sinne said or did to Mawlana Khalid's disciples, but his advice about how to respond to them is unambiguous. Following is the first two-thirds of the letter:

The soothing letter from our beloveds in Kurdistan, may the peace of God on High be upon them, arrived by means of our brother in the *tariqat*, Hajji Muhammad. I remember you all with prayers for your good. I hope you will remain under the watch of the high chain of masters (*pîr*); and what you had expressed concerning our beloved Mirza Farajallah and Mirza Hudayetallah, was confirmed in conversation with Mirza Hudayetallah, who even [gave special

attention to the matter]. The root of felicity (*se'adat*) is love of this work place.¹⁵ The Shah of the Naqshband,¹⁶ may he be blessed, has said:

Turn towards our line of servants and do not fear
Humble yourself on the earth of our doorstep and do not fear
If the whole world makes designs on your soul
Be strong in your love for us and do not fear

Don't even (bother with) the cackling of the deniers. Jami¹⁷ has written a *qasîda* in praise of this holy lineage (*silsila*) in which he says:

All the lions of the world are bound to this *silsila*
How could a fox by a trick break his way into this *silsila*?

Concerning the futility of those who regard the folk of the inner domain (*batin*) with obstinate denial, Mawlana Rumi says:

Mustafa sliced the moon in the middle of the night
Abu Lahab prattled on purely in spite¹⁸

The point is this: no attention should be paid to anything that comes from the source of wickedness or from mouths and tongues [full] of depravity and envy. Devotees there should be preoccupied with their own devotion. They have expressed their admiration of high and noble men, and from this poor wretch, they have asked for assistance and letters of correspondence. Their previous good deeds are precious in my eyes (*nisbat al-ayn ast*) and they shall never be deprived of assistance in the inner domains (*imdad-e batin*) or their requests pertaining to external affairs (*du'a-e zahir*) but since people frequently arrive from Kurdistan both here and in Sulaimani they have rarely sent letters of consolation to the exiled wretches [i.e. Mawlana Khalid]; if we are to busy you with letter-writing then surely it should be done in the most beautiful way because "humility from the noble is virtuous."¹⁹

Don't bother. No attention should be paid. Be preoccupied with your own devotion. If there were occasions when a public defense was necessary (see Arabic Letter 4 below), Mawlana Khalid here shows that there are other occasions when the antagonism that

¹⁵ The Persian *karkhane* or "workplace" refers to the *terîqet*.

¹⁶ Muhammad Baha' al-din Shah Naqshband, "founder" of the Naqshbandi *terîqet*.

¹⁷ Abdulrahman Jami (1414–1492) was a renowned poet who collected and passed down much Sufi literature. He was also affiliated with the Naqshbandi *terîqet*.

¹⁸ This couplet refers to the famous event of Muhammad (here called Mustafa) slicing the moon. Abu Lahab was a famous enemy of Muhammad who denied his status as a Prophet.

¹⁹ This phrase "humility from the noble is virtuous" is a half-line of poetry from Sa'di Shirazi. The whole couplet is: "humility from beggars is simply their way, but humility from the noble is [truly] virtuous."

accompanies religious difference should simply be ignored. The three poems that he includes to address this problem suggest that the temptation to bother, to give attention, to be distracted from one's devotions is something that arises from fear. Mawlana Khalid gives these poems to equip his followers with courage in the face of the detractors, reminding them that the prattling of deniers or the scheming of foxes cannot break their connection to the Prophet through the spiritual lineage of the Naqshbandi.

The encouragement that Mawlana Khalid first offers in the form of these poems is then echoed in two other ways. He reassures his followers that he remembers them in his prayers, and he agrees to ongoing written correspondence. Mawlana Khalid says that he could not presume that they would want to read his letters but that upon their request he will reply to them. Having already described their letter to him as “soothing,” he then makes a request for their written correspondence by complaining that they have been content to send only oral reports with travelers. If we take the three components of the letter—the poems, the assurance of prayers, and the request for correspondence—as responding to the threat of detractors, then the letter suggests that poetry lodged in written correspondence is one way to sustain the integrity of the Muslim community by learning to live with the threats of separation that necessarily accompany different orientations to Islam.

Scents and Sounds of Himmat (Spiritual Aspiration)

How precisely may written correspondence enable ongoing moral striving alongside the threat of separation? If living as a Muslim committed to the Naqshbandi path requires more than intellectual assent but also ongoing bodily discipline and companionship with

fellow travelers on the path, then how can a letter replace companionship? I approach these questions by examining the recurring theme of the senses in the letters. As much as the letters emphasize the beauty of language, they also demonstrate the multi-sensory effects of language. If not comparable to physical companionship, the beauty of language nonetheless gives texture to an embodied way of living. Here I turn from the letters that foreground the need for reconciliation to the letters that were traded between Mawlana Khalid and his longstanding intimates.

Abu-Manneh (2000) reports that it was the Heyderi family who welcomed Mawlana Khalid to Baghdad during the first period of his exile from Slêmanî (in 1811 or 1813). Abu-Manneh describes the family as “of Kurdish origin” and “one of the great notable families of Baghdad in the first half of the 19th century” (2000:17). Biographical dictionaries confirm a long history of scholarship within this family (Mudarris 1984:223ff; Qaradaghi 2004:226). Among the hundreds of works mentioned by scholars in this family, I here highlight only one. Ibrahim Heyderi (d. 1739) composed a Farsi commentary on the Arabic poetry of Ibn Fard, who is one of the most famous Sufi poets to have written in Arabic (Qaradaghi 2004:226; cf. Homerin 1994). Ibrahim’s grandson Abdullah was among those to welcome Mawlana Khalid in Baghdad, and he later spent much time traveling with Mawlana Khalid in Hawreman region of Kurdistan. A cousin of Abdullah’s and also descended from Ibrahim, Abdulqadir Heyderi was from Baghdad but was later appointed as chief judge in Basra.

Arabic Letter Number 41 is addressed to Abdulqadir Heyderi during his period of residence in Basra. Mawlana Khalid indicates that it had been some time since he had heard more than a few words from Abdulqadir, but the latter wrote a letter of warm

welcome upon Mawlana Khalid's arrival in Baghdad. Following opening greetings, there is a tone of loving complaint in Mawlana Khalid's words:

Now then, the length of time in our separation has been drawn out, and the hope of union for those who love one another seems rare. Indeed it had come to pass that we opened up your [old] letters to breathe in the scent of your loving spirit through your noble (*ra'iq*) expressions, and so we consoled our hearts in this separation, just as the poet said in this Persian couplet:

Since the flowers have fallen and the garden has gone bad
Where else can I catch the scent of flowers but from rosewater?

It had been some time that nothing but the slightest thing had reached us from your handwriting—and our speculations for [the reasons behind this] were nothing but the best—until the letter that you wrote upon the arrival of this wretch to that fortress of noble saints, Baghdad, the city of peace. [This letter] took the place of the many that had been neglected by virtue of the jewels of poetry and prose that you strung throughout it. [. . .] Even if it was itself beautiful, it also takes the place of many letters.

Love is here figured as a scent that is preserved in the written words of a letter that waits to be reopened. Mawlana Khalid appears as a desperate lover figure, so eager for news of one whom he loves that he sorts through old letters to catch a scent of their love. It was sometimes the case that letters literally bore a scent since scholars may have written them in perfumed ink, or on distinctive materials such as a fox's skin. So the attribution of scent probably bears a literal dimension. This sensory experience, though, is secondary to physical companionship. When one cannot dwell in the gardens of companionship, one breathes in the rosewater of written letters. Even this scent, though, offers consolation to Mawlana Khalid's heart that ached from separation and the lack of correspondence.

In his letter to Abdullah Heyderi in Baghdad (Persian Letter 186), the theme of scent appears again. This letter was probably written from Damascus during Mawlana Khalid's final period of exile there (1822–1827). After a brief greeting, Mawlana Khalid

addresses Abdullah respectfully as the *faqirs*²⁰ and subsequently in the third-person plural:

The *faqirs* remembered this humble man with a soothing letter perfumed with ambergris, [in which] they indicated their hopes and expectations for the aforementioned, and in remembering the heavenly home it [*i.e.*, the letter] set the falcon of spiritual aspiration (*himmat*) to flight, flickered the flames of the heart, and brought to flames and drops the heart that is the home of love.

*The scent of the morning breeze arrived from Zawra
It brought back to life the dead who [had been] revived*²¹

Here again the theme of scent is brought forward, a scent that permeates four overlapping aspects of the love that envelops “spiritual aspiration” (*himmat*). First it is a scent associated with the author of the letter, Abdullah Heyderi. Second, it is the scent of Zawra, an old neighborhood that in Baghdad dates to the Abbasid days, and a scent of which Mawlana Khalid was woefully deprived while in Damascus. But third, it is a scent whose majesty and beauty are only intimations or shadows of the true majesty and beauty that belong to God in his “heavenly home.” This theme is brought forward in the poem’s reference to resurrection (since it is only divine power that effects such resuscitation). The fourth aspect of the love referenced in the scent described in this section is very subtle but I believe it is worth noting. If one knows that the poem cited was written by Ibn Fard, and that the grandfather of the recipient had spent a portion of his life composing a commentary on Ibn Fard’s poetry (which Abdullah must certainly have studied), then we can see how poem also bears a trace of Mawlana Khalid’s admiration for the scholarly lineage to which Abdullah Heyderi belonged.

²⁰ The *faqirs* literally means the “poor” or the “destitute.” It designates aspirants in a way that not only foregrounds their humility and their deep dependence on God, but the humility requisite of one who has achieved such a noble status on the Sufi path.

²¹ This text is italicized since the letter itself is written in Persian but the poem is in Arabic.

The next sentences of the letter take up the first of these four aspects, expressing Mawlana Khalid's longing for his companions in Baghdad:

But what can be done? Though this one has been struck mad with a longing for that place that only swells more and more, the servants at that place that is full of the intoxicated (*makān-i maynawushān*) desire separation all the more.

My aims are for union and [his] inclinations are toward separation
I gave up my own wishes that my friend might have [his] [Hafiz]

The next section turns our attention to another sensorial dimension of spiritual aspiration proper to letters. If there is something unspeakable or inexpressible about the sorrow of his separation from his companions, Mawlana Khalid nonetheless finds a voice for that sorrow through the words of another, and also through a tune:

The last leg of patience is drawn into the pant-leg of long-suffering, I have resigned myself to existence or non-existence. My heart is bound to separation, and I have left off my pleas for union. What is unspeakable in my condition is in the tune of this speech:

I settle down and pull my feet up beneath my legs
That the work of faithfulness deliver me

Pausing to recall the letter above in which Mawlana Khalid wrote to his arrogant friend

("I find there is nothing else to be said except for the two lines of Nizami Gangavi.

Therefore I limit what I have to say to what he has said.") we can see that it is common to these letters that a poem renders audible what is unspeakable. Poems appear in such a way as to render musical the love and affection shared by correspondents. In this light, we may read Mawlana Khalid's letter to Abdullah Heyderi as a series of declarations of love. Love takes different permutations in each poem, and it moves across the senses as scent and sound.

This love is emotional, embodied, and multi-sensory. It is a theme that recurs in the letters addressed to many of Mawlana Khalid's friends and disciples. Here two

questions arise. First, is this love connected to sexual desire? I answer simply that I have found nothing in the letters to indicate that desire belongs to this register. I argued in Chapter Three that certain aspects of everyday life require a concept of pleasure that is not tethered to the domain of sexuality but remains at the center of our reflections on ethics. The letters of Mawlana Khalid are further evidence for this, since there is almost no evidence to indicate the sexual nature of desire, but every indication that desire and its attendant pleasures are at the foreground of the ethics of relationships.

This leads to the second question: Is this desire merely a human desire? Here the term *himmat* is one factor that shows it is not merely human. While its usage in contemporary Farsi may indicate a more common sense of “trying” or “effort,” its appearance in the Sufi vocabularies is marked by a distinctly spiritual aspect of aspiring to the divine. That is why I have translated it as “spiritual aspiration.” If it is the falcon of *himmat* that is set to flight by Abdullah’s letters, it is not simply spiritual aspiration to companionship, but spiritual aspiration to the goal of all companionship among followers of the Naqshbandi *terîqet*: proximity to the divine by means of upholding the example of the Prophet. Appearing in poetic idiom and in the medium of the letter, desire connects Mawlana Khalid to Abdullah Heyderi and to the divine.

Here we may also benefit from a glance to Chapter Two. There I argued that it was partly because Serdar knew himself to always fail in love that the imagination of a divine and infinite desire animated his relations with his wife, his brother, and his friends. In that chapter the threat of separation that defined religious difference was registered by Serdar’s silent response to his brother’s invitations to pray. Here the question of religious difference is by no means the same. Abdullah was a devoted companion of Mawlana

Khalid. But the threat of separation that persists in their relationship animates their ethical striving. In lieu of overcoming separation between friends, separation is taken as a shadow of one's separation from the divine. The struggle is not to overcome separation so much as to endure it with patience. Patience here indicates hopefulness in the work of time, as was indicated in the poem: "I settle down and pull my feet up beneath my legs / that the work of faithfulness deliver me." So if it was the disappointments of desire that animated poetic fragments for Serdar, it is the lingering separation of friends and a hope for union with the divine that animates poetic fragments for Mawlana Khalid. And in both cases, it is patience and forgiveness that make ongoing relations possible. (If direct historical descent here is difficult to prove, the resonance is clear, which is why this might be called a possible genealogy.)

Swimming for Pearls: The Hidden in Language

I have sketched a picture of the work of language in the letters of Mawlana Khalid that emphasized its capacities to affect correspondents. But of course language has its limits. In this section I turn briefly to the limits of expression as they appear in the letters of Mawlana Khalid. While studies of Sufi thought and expression often turn to the notion of the ineffable as the inevitable failure of language to represent experience (e.g. Lawrence 1992). I want to argue here that a different picture of language's limits emerges from Mawlana Khalid's letters, one that privileges the hidden in language as showing its limits.

To address this theme, I turn to a letter addressed to Mirza Lutfullah (Persian Letter 91). Mawlana Khalid begins by indicating through reference to a *hadith* the love

shared between he and Mirza Lutfullah: The more one loves something the more one remembers (or recollects) it. Mirza Lutfullah's recollection in this case took the form of letters. Mawlana Khalid goes on to praise the poetry and prose of the letters as "a string of pearls" and "an ark of treasures." In the following sentence, Mawlana Khalid both humbles himself before the praise that the letters lavished upon him and praises the letters as an expression of truths befitting the Masters of the Naqshbandi:

If it were not for the fact that it is addressed to this forsaken person full of faults from head to toe who wanders so far from the state of union with the true beloved, then every point from that string of pearls could be accepted as a pearl on the earrings that adorn the Masters of Awareness, and every tune from that melody might be a comfort to those afflicted by love—and perhaps even stoke the flames [of their love].

Following this passage Mawlana Khalid addresses a concept of "hiddenness." What is hidden here is the divine reality that Mawlana Khalid refers to as the "True Master" (*Mawla-ye Haqiqi*). He goes on to describe how that divine reality is at once hidden from the servant (of God, *bandeh*), and continually manifested to that servant:

From the servant to the True Master—who is in fact closer than the jugular to any creature that bears a soul²²—there are 70,000 veils. Every day, many breaths of the theophany (*tajalliyat*) of beauty (*jamali*) and majesty (*jalali*) shine upon the [. . .] sons of Adam. [But] those who are veiled by the veil of self-hood (*nafsani*) and chained by the veils of humanity and creatureliness are totally ignorant of this—indeed one may almost say that they deny it.

This dense passage requires careful consideration. Let us first consider the relation between the veils and the theophany. On the one hand the text claims that between each servant and the divine reality are 70,000 veils.²³ On the other hand it says that every day the divine reality manifests itself (through theophany, *tajalli*) to the servants. But we

²² Mawlana Khalid here refers to *Qur'an* 50:16, which Yusuf Ali translates as follows: "It was we who created man and we know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for we are nearer to him than his jugular vein."

²³ The theme of 70,000 veils of separation also appears in a hadith of the Prophet discussed by Baha al-Din Naqshband (Parsa 1975: 67).

must be careful not to suppose that this manifestation constitutes a rending or lifting of veils, since in fact the text says nothing of this kind. There is no reason to suppose that the task of the servant is to become other-than-human by rending the veil of humanity and creatureliness, and perceiving divine reality as unveiled. The task, rather, is to obtain the spiritual vision, *basirat*, that enables one to perceive divine reality as veiled, in its hiddenness.

How then does this hiddenness relate to language? Does it fail to translate into language and become ineffable? Is the spiritual vision (*basirat*) that perceives divine reality as veiled simply mute? Or is language somehow equipped to express the experience or knowledge of the divine as hidden? The next section of the letter addresses these questions in a subtle but insightful manner through the citation of a poem by Hafiz:

The heart said "I desire knowledge of the divine,
Instruct me if you are able"
I said "Alif," the heart said "what else?," I said "nothing!
If there is anyone at home, one letter is sufficient."

"Alif," or "A," is the first letter of the alphabet and of God's name, Allah. It is here rendered as a knock on the door, and the subsequent letters of the alphabet (or the letters "llah" to complete God's name) as the inhabitants of a home: if anyone is there, just one letter is sufficient to bring them out. Some interpretive strategies would emphasize the following letters of the divine name as ineffable or unspeakable. But if we consider "alif" that is spoken aloud then we have to step beyond the usual claim that language is insufficient to represent experience and ask instead how language bears the capacity to show the hidden. On this view, the entirety of the alphabet (or God's name) is not so much "ineffable" as veiled—and expressed in language as veiled. Within the context of the letter, the citation then makes sense not as an effort to draw the addressee's attention

to what the letter does not say, but to draw his attention to the insight available in what it has said. In other words, if there is any spiritual aspiration in Mirza Lutfullah, then what Mawlana Khalid writes is sufficient to bring it out—just as “A” leads to “Allah” and just as a single note can become a tune in the melody that consoles the hearts of those afflicted by love. The organ that perceives divine truth in its hiddenness is *basirat* (inner vision or spiritual vision). So how does one acquire *basirat*?

To answer this I turn briefly to a letter Mawlana Khalid wrote in reply to Mirza Abdulwehab Mushili Memaliki Iran (Persian Letter 188). Mawlana Khalid’s letter makes it clear that Mirza Abdulwehab had posed some profound questions, probably concerning mystical knowledge (*‘ilm-e tasawwuf* or *‘ilm-e batin*). Mawlana Khalid begins with an extended section acknowledging receipt of the letter and giving the praise to Abdulwehab that is his due as a princely authority. But the letter takes a sharp turn with the citation of the following poem:

The darwish and the wealthy are both bound to beg at that gate,
[but] those who are more wealthy are in greater need.

These lines make clear that Mirza Lutfullah, as a man immersed in wealth, is in even greater need to make supplications to the divine. Mawlana Khalid appeals to the authoritative speech of the saints and friends of God (the “kings of the clime of Being’s beneficence”) as he explains the impossibility of the kind of explanation that Mirza Lutfullah seeks: if the latter hopes for a discursive explanation of divine realities, Mawlana Khalid redirects his attention to what is required of one who would ask for the knowledge of divine (*‘ilm-e laduni*), as Hafiz’s heart had done. (To render visible in English the parallelism and rhyme that is audible in the Persian original, I have introduced my own spacing to this letter.)

The peaks of discovery and witnessing and the kings of the clime of Being's beneficence (may God sanctify us by their secrets and illuminate us by their effulgence and their luminosity) teach that obtaining the secrets of the mystics (*ahl al-hal*) and reveling in the splendor (*ratbe*) of his glory and majesty—even after long periods of physical companionship and union, and even after leaving off of possessions and family—is beyond the domain of speech and utterance and outside the reach of instruction or imagination.

Thus without diving,
to grab hold of a pearl from that deep ocean,
Without taking up the bewildering path of annihilation (*fana*),
To obtain a jewel from among the jewels of that precious treasure—
—merely through writing and composition, what chance is there for this?
—merely by means of messages and envoys, what possibility?

The secrets of the Real will not be unloosed by questions
without also letting go of possessions and luxury.
Without fifty years of bleeding hearts and eyes
never will you find a way from conditioned speech to gnostic conditions.

While Mawlana Khalid claims that divine knowledge is an inaccessible secret, the passage also contains three descriptions of how the secrets are to be obtained. Most directly, it says that one must take up the path of annihilation. This is elaborated through two poetic metaphors: that one must dive into the deep ocean, and that one must bleed through one's heart and eyes for 50 years. In this sense, even if the secrets are not “revealed” or “solved” in language, their hiddenness is nonetheless preserved there through these poetic metaphors. While Mawlana Khalid describes the impossibility of describing, he shows or demonstrates the very movement toward the infinite that Mirza Lutfullah seeks. When one is unequipped with the *basirat* (inner vision), an *alif* (“A”) is just an *alif*. But when one embarks on the mystical path, then the one inaugurates the transformation that allows one to discern what is hidden in the *alif*.²⁴

²⁴ The approach to language as hiding divine truths that I find in Mawlana Khalid's letters resonates strongly with the approach that Sara Sviri (2002) discerned in the work of Hakim al-Tirmidhi. Two passages summarize that resonance: “Language is thus both revealing and concealing. It is ‘revealing’ since all that exists becomes known by being named. And it is ‘concealing’ since this naming is merely an external differentiating device encoding something internal which cannot be cognized unless it is decoded

Lodged in Rumi's quatrain is a transition to the final theme from the letters for this chapter. The poem takes the blood of sorrow and struggle that pours forth from the eyes as the locus of transformation. The heart and the eyes are identified as organs of perception that are transformed through suffering as they witness divine truth. How exactly might the eyes witness divine truth and thereby transform the body and soul?

A Virtue of Perception: Husn and Ihsan

We may begin with the Fourth Arabic letter which Mawlana Khalid addressed to his disciple and deputy in Istanbul. This is a particularly long letter that is well known for its rigorous defense of the practice of *rabita*, by which aspirants visualize their Sheikh and so enable a transfer of spiritual blessing and capacity for aspiration. Mawlana Khalid writes to defend the practice against the accusations that it is an innovation, and in the course of his argument cites both Qur'an and *hadith*. Not limiting his case to the original sources, though, he also anchors his argument on the lineage of scholars that connects him as a Muslim (and by extension, any one of his disciples who would practice *rabita*) to the Prophet Muhammad. This lineage includes Shafi'i Naqshbandis such as Ubaydullah Ahrar. But it also mentions other well-respected Sufis beyond his lineage who are not associated with the Naqshbandi such as Ghazali and Suhrawardi. Finally, Mawlana Khalid mentions Sufis affiliated with other legal schools such as Abd al-Ghani Nablusi and Abdulqadir Geylani. The effect of citing such a wide range of past

by means of God-inspired knowledge" (212). And, "Linguistic elements become inspired by inner 'seeing': when a word, or a sacred formula, is intrinsically 'seen' and 'known,' its inner 'lights' are externalized and it becomes powerful and efficacious. It is then said to have 'ascended' to God and to have been pronounced in front of God's Throne. The process, or ritual, by which linguistic formulae become empowered, involves the coordination of the practitioner's bodily, psychic, mental and spiritual faculties" (232).

authorities is to show that while the practice of *rabita* has been perfected by the Naqshbandis, it has its precedent in the practices of multiple lineages to the Prophet. So a dispute over this practice should not tear away at the fabric of the Muslim community—even if one’s attachment to the Prophet does not involve the Naqshbandi. The letter in defense of *rabita* is a letter in defense of the integrity of the Muslim community, an effort to keep open the path of the Naqshbandi to the divine, and a struggle against the fragmentations threatened by those who denounce it. If it also has the effect of securing Mawlana Khalid’s authority within the Naqshbandi, it is because he has shown the roots of this practice in the broadest base of the Muslim community across time. The point is not to diminish other paths nor to consolidate the personal influence of Mawlana Khalid. This is explicitly stated in the second of two reasons that he gives for having written the letter: “to admonish the designs of the foolish, their falsifications, their attempts to defile this group (*ta’ifah*); lest they close the gate of the truly impoverished to God on high.”

The first of the two reasons Mawlana Khalid gives for writing the letter is equally significant. In the passage below he begins by emphasizing the unity of the *terîqet* with the *shari’at*, then listing some techniques practiced by the Naqshbandi—all of which are shared with other *terîqet* to differing degrees. He concludes by emphasizing the lineage of the scholars and the noble precedent of the Companions of the Prophet. But in between he cites a *hadith* that we shall consider below. (Here again my spacing renders the parallelism of the Arabic text.)

[I have written in order to] protect the *tariqat* that is bound to the goals of reaching the approval of God (*riza Allah*) and following the Prophet who can be reached by:

clinging to the foundations of the [practice of the] righteous (*ahl sunna*) who are true Muslims (*farqa al-najiyya*)
and disowning the [practices of those who are] lowly (*taqat*)

and taking up resolution
 and seeking the approval of a sheikh (*Mawla*),
 and continuous meditation (*muraqaba*)
 and disowning the worthless world and all things other than God;
 and the great feature that is the bridge to [God] is in the great saying [about]
ihsan—and that is to worship God [as if] you see him, and if you cannot
 see him, he sees you;
 and isolation in the crowd (*khalwat fi al-jalwat*)
 and clinging to the help and assistance of the *'ulama*
 and silent *dhikr* and controlling the breath [in such a way that] breath does not
 exit and does not enter without awareness of God almighty
 and conducting yourself according to the ethics of the friends of the Finest of
 Creatures [i.e. the Companions of the Prophet] upon whom be peace.

The *hadith* refers to the virtue of *ihsan*, that might be translated into English as “virtuous excellence.” It might also be translated as “beautiful character” if one bears in mind the etymology of the word which derives from *h-s-n*, the root verb meaning “to be beautiful” (cf. Chittick & Murato 1994). *Ihsan* is here named as the leading bridge (*ma'abar* might also be translated as “means” or “crossing point”) to the state of righteousness described as acceptance by God (*riza Allah*). The *hadith* shows an explicit connection between ethical aspiration and a mode of perception: the one who bears *ihsan* is one whose worship is characterized first of all by a mode of perception—seeing God—and secondarily as a mode of being perceived (being seen by God).

But what precisely is at stake in “seeing God” in this way? To answer this we can turn to another Persian letter (Number 163) that Mawlana Khalid addressed to Osman Beg. In this letter he specifies what is meant by seeing God, and goes on to delineate three classes of persons by virtue of the manner in which they see—or fail to see—God. These classes are not his own invention but he attributes them to the *muhaqqan*, a term that indicates “those who have confirmed the Truth/Reality through investigation”:

According to the *muhaqqan*, felicity is understood as the domain of union (*wisal*) in the incomparable Beloved (*mahbub*)—exalted by his majesty—and witnessing

(*mushahade*) the beauty (*jamal*) of the Most Majestic; and misery is understood as the opposite of this. And the division is of three classes: (1) The class of the absolutely excluded (take refuge in God most High), and these are *kafr* who neither in the world nor in the end will they savor this felicity. (2) The second class are sinners whose eyes are trained on the righteous forerunners in faith. Even though they are excluded from that domain in the world, in the final abode (*dar al-qarar*) they will have it. Since they are associated with that wealth, this group can be called felicitous. And since they are continuously—in this world and in the end—hesitant (*sharmasar*) to savor that bounty (*karamat*), and [since] in the domain of the world they are bound to the commands of the *nafs* and the savoring of animal desires, and [since] they are satisfied by other than that sanctified one, they can be called miserable. (3) The third class is the saints of God whose vision (*didar*) of that domain is not covered even for the blink of an eye, neither in the world and the end. *Oh, would that I had been with them, that I could succeed in their glorious success!* [Qur'an 4:73] These are those selected for pure felicity. And before [their] arrival, this third class can be divided into two groups: (3a) one group whose approach depends on struggle and striving. If they extend their efforts they will enter the third class, and if not they [remain] in the second class. The gatekeepers of the path have named this group *murîd*. (3b) And another group has their approach to arrival/union (*wisal*) by means of divine striving and the attraction (*jadhba*) of the Eternal Divine; if they themselves desire, or if they do not desire it, they are sure to be taken and delivered to the domain of an undiminishing union. These are called *murad* and the path of the chosen ones is this one; and all of the prophets—upon whom be peace and blessings—went on this path. So the ordinary Muslims are not called *murad* because their great felicity depends upon striving and if they do not exert themselves in striving [then they will not arrive]. But because they have been (will be?) freed from eternal [bondage to] sweetness [of the world] and delivered to the domain of vision (*didar*) of the Lord of lords, they can be called *murad*. But they take this designation in comparison to the purely miserable who are *kafrs*.

This letter draws our attention to three dimensions of what it means to worship God as if you see God. First, as concerns perception, the “object” of perception here is the beauty (*jamal*) of God. While the beauty of God is not to be confused with God himself, that beauty is not to be considered apart from majesty (*jalal*)—emphasizing the continual intertwining of God’s mercy (an expression of his beauty) and his wrath (that expresses his majesty). These are the two dimensions of *tajalli* or theophany, that divide humanity into the class of those who manifest God’s wrath by never enjoying felicity,

and those who manifest God's mercy by beholding God's beauty. Second, there is a shift in usage from the term *mushahade*, which indicates a kind of witnessing that occurs in the heart and mind and soul, to the term *didar*, which is more explicitly corporeal vision. Though similar in meaning, the use of *didar* emphasizes the sensory dimension of witnessing (a dimension that could be de-emphasized if Mawlana Khalid wanted to stress a disembodied intellectualist version of witnessing). Through this shift, Mawlana Khalid brings to the forefront the notion of perception. Finally, the three classes of *kafirs*, ordinary Muslims, and saints are not organized by the kind or volume of deeds or actions they perform, but according to what they see and perceive of God's beauty: whether or not they will see it, when they will see, and by whose efforts (*koshish*) they will see it.

That the achievement of beholding God's beauty on a continual basis is not a result of their own efforts but of divine efforts draws our attention to the concept of "reception" that appears in this passage and the letters more generally. The key term in this letter is *jadhba*, an electric kind of attraction whose material metaphors include the work of ambergris on dry hay, and whose hyperbole includes the attraction of great mountains as if they were flimsy strands of grass. The term appears in the second division of those who will see God on a continual basis, and it designates the means by which God draws *murad* unto himself. It is important to note Mawlana quickly but carefully disentangles this concept from the idea of "will" or "decision," claiming that attraction works on the *murad* whether or not she desires it (*agar khud mayl kunand wa agar nakunand*). In this respect, the saints of God share a path with the Prophets, since it was God's work, God's attraction that delivers them to the felicity of Prophethood. This categorization serves to emphasize the priority given to the one who has a capacity to

receive—to be drawn toward divinity. Furthermore, the locus of that reception is spiritual and sensory.

Bearing in mind these ideas of sensory perception (*mushahade* and *didar*), of divine beauty (*husn*), and the reception of divine attraction (*jadhba*), we may return to the *hadith* concerning *ihsan* (moral excellence) and discern more clearly the virtue it describes. *Ihsan* is the virtue of that human who has become a receptacle for divine *husn*. In becoming receptive—or rather, finding oneself receptive—to divine attraction, one “sees” God continually.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion I offer three claims. First, the virtue of *ihsan* as the continual reception of divine beauty that is prescribed in the last letter is also performed throughout the *maktubat* as Mawlana Khalid’s receptivity to the beauty of language in the letters of his companions. It was the beauty of language, expressions of desire, poetic fragments and rhyming prose that “set the falcon of spiritual aspiration (*himmat*) to flight” and “churned the oceans of longing.” The language of the letters, in other words, is one domain of the *tajalli*, or theophany, in which the beauty of God becomes manifest in the world. Recalling the views of ‘Abd al-Ghani described in the opening pages of this chapter, we can see how radically different is the picture of language that emerges from Mawlana Khalid’s letters. Poetic fragments and rhyming prose are not merely “literary” dimensions separable from the “religious,” they are the manifestations of *husn* (beauty) whose reception defines the virtue of *ihsan*.

My second claim follows from this, that by attending to the texture of the language of the letters, Mawlana Khalid does not appear as a figure at the front of a socio-religious movement who develops new doctrines and strategizes for the expansion of the *terîqet*. On the contrary, we see that the letters were a domain of persuasion through which he sought to revitalize the moral striving of Muslims. Persuasion was accomplished not through novelty, innovation and aggrandizement of his own authority but through proving his submission to the authority of the Masters of the Naqshbandi and opening the door for other Muslims to strive in the same way. While he strove to keep that door open, Mawlana Khalid was vigilant about the persistence of difference within the Muslim community. While some threats to the integrity of that community were to be met through agonistic debate or even prayers for the devastation of enemies, other kinds of difference within the Muslim community were to be met with courage and renewed resolution to the devotions of the Sufi path.

Third, the virtue of *ishan* as the continual reception of divine beauty resonates strongly with two concepts from the preceding chapters. In Chapter Two we saw that Pexshan's (in)capacity to receive the beauty of Islam (via the recited Qur'an) was an index of her disinterest in a normative Muslim striving. It was only the force of Zoroastrianism's beauty paradoxically inserted into the general feeling of being part of a community that rendered the accident of her fasting attractive to her. In the terms we discovered through the study of Mawlana Khalid's letters, we might say that the paradox by which she receives divine *husn* indexes the paradox of her relation to the Islamic virtue of *ihsan*. In Chapter Three, we that Niyaz's receptivity (to pleasure, and we might also say, to beauty) was above all else an ethical posture that facilitated further

encounters with others. These encounters, in turn, enabled ongoing connections with intimate others as well as figures from the “imagination” of memory and fantasy. In Niyaz’s case, too, it was the lack of an attractive force that indexed his disinterest in prayer. In the letters, too, it is the posture of receptivity toward divine beauty that defines the ethical posture of the prophets and the Masters of the Naqshbandi. Their role is to mediate for believers, to facilitate encounters and enable an ongoing relationship to the figure of the Prophet. The resonance is palpable. To be sure, this is a resonance that encompasses a vast difference since the disciplines of the Sufi path and even the minimal discipline of prayer were not among the resolutions that characterize ethical striving for Pexshan and Niyaz. Nevertheless the resonance asks for some kind of acknowledgement. The notion of a possible genealogy allows us to acknowledge that resonance, to see that in both of these domains where intimate relations between Muslims are fragile, poetic fragments animate the texture of moral striving.

CONCLUSION

In 2013 I returned to the teashop described in the Introduction. While there were some new faces there, many of the religious scholars still frequented the teashop. I was eager to see the Doctor. I spent many mornings waiting for him but he never appeared. It was with a heavy heart that finally I left on my last day there, resigned to the fleeting nature of that encounter, savoring it for the ways it had enlarged my capacity to think about poetry in Kurdistan. I walked through the bazaar that has appeared several times in these chapters: I approached the street where I had walked with Serdar and listened to him recite Tayer Beg's poem; I could see the Great Mosque, where Mawlana Khalid was said to have escaped an assassination attempt and where Kak Ahmadi Sheikh had welcomed the Jewish merchant in Niyaz's tale.

No sooner had I given up than I was surprised to see the Doctor approaching me sprightly and distracted. He invited me for tea but insisted we not to return the teashop where we first met. I told him that I had been thinking about the poem he recited to me. I produced a different version of the same poem from a draft of the brand new edition of Mewlewi's poetry compiled by Muhammad Ali Qaradaghi. He looked at the printed page that was scattered with Qaradaghi's red correction marks and said, "yes, this one is correct. The one that I told you is the version my uncle taught me." I asked about his uncle and he said that his uncle had memorized a lot of Sufi poetry. When I asked if he was involved in a *terîqet*, the Doctor denied this quite emphatically. "My uncle was very special," he said. "He was a Muslim, but..."

he voice trailed off and then returned: “but not like these Muslims.” Some curious customers in the teashop wanted to chat and somehow the Doctor and I ended up having a humorous conversation in which I spoke Farsi and he spoke English. Before I knew it we parted ways and I had little more than these suggestive phrases to remember.

Reflecting on them later, I was led to wonder what kind of Muslim his uncle was. It was not entirely clear what he meant by “these Muslims,” whom his uncle did not resemble, but his tone of voice was not one of admiration. I was also led to wonder about the occasions on which his uncle recited this poetry, what kind of relation emerged between the two, and how others in their family regarded his uncle’s way of being “Muslim, but... not like these Muslims.” As much as I would like to learn these things, my research taught me that this is rarely the kind of knowledge that appears in interviews or in response to direct queries about what one believes. Learning the moral force of poetry required of me patient attendance to relationships and openness to surprise.

In these chapters I have sought to respond both to Hama’s plea that I learn to find pleasure in classical Kurdish poetry and to the Doctor’s exclamation that Mewlewî’s poem is philosophy. I have sought to calibrate those pleas with the standing literature in anthropology, Kurdish studies and Islamic studies about the life of poetry in Muslim societies. And inspiring all of this is my own pressing desire to understand both the ethical lives available to Muslims who turn away from pietistic striving and how Muslims bear up the threats that accompany religious difference in intimate contexts.

In the Introduction I argued for the distinctiveness of the everyday as an aspect of living that can sustain difference by absorbing and transforming the processes often approached through the concepts of discourse, practice and secularization. I suggested that the study of everyday life in Muslim societies has tended to emphasize pietistic striving as definitive of a Muslim's relationship to Islamic traditions. This emphasis has resulted in an impoverished picture of more paradoxical relations to Islam. So I set out to render the texture of those paradoxical relations in ethnographic prose.

In Chapter One, Serdar answered his brother's encouragement to pray with silence but he later called him on the phone to share the beauty of the recited Qur'an. For all the love and longing that he expressed for his wife, he was also mindful of the limits and failings of that desire, and also mindful of the abiding threat that some misplaced words might put his marriage in jeopardy. I wanted to answer the question of how a man who is "other" than pious might come to love the Sufi poetry that projects an ambiguous Beloved, who might be human or might be divine. I argued that it is not the identity of the Beloved that is at stake. It is rather the constant failings of the lover, whose desire must always be renewed. It was not the effort to realize a desire that would transcend all difference, but the effort to inhabit a set of relationships that bear up difference even when desire seems fragile.

In Chapter Two, Pexshan spurned the recited Qur'an and the arrival of Ramazan but later found herself fasting and enjoyed feeling like part of a community. I traced the theme of beauty from scenes in her childhood where it was paired against the 'dryness' of her father's attitude, through her disappointment in

the supposed beauty of the Qur'an and into her account of Zoroastrianism whose beauty was rendered in her explanation of her accidental fast. These scenes elide categorization as normative or transgressive, and I sought to resist the temptation to classify experiences of beauty in these terms. Taking up Wittgenstein's suggestion to attend to the complicated situations in which expressions of beauty arise, I was able to give an account of beauty's paradoxes that accommodates her attraction to Zoroastrianism and the sense of participating with pious Muslims in the fasting of Ramazan. Only when these paradoxes are sustained can one appreciate the moral force of Khayyam's poem, to the effect that the journey of living ought not be confined to either the way of doubt or the way of certainty.

In Chapter Three, Niyaz found no pleasure in pious prayer. But he did find pleasure in the prayers of the pious. I turned to the texts of the Sufis whom he most admired to show the availability of a discourse that would censure his lack of pleasure in prayer. In the face of these threats I examined a generalized posture that Niyaz assumed toward his kin in the material environment of his home and toward the great Sufi poets that animate his imagination. This was a posture of receptivity that was ethical insofar as it facilitated ongoing encounters with others. Reviewing recent work on ethics in anthropology, I took Spinoza's definition of pleasure as an opportunity to wrest a concept of pleasure as an ethical attitude from the prevailing focus on sexual pleasures.

If after all the descriptive work of these chapters it is still difficult to define their relationships to Islam, then I will count it as a success. That is because the kind of relationship to Islam that I seek to elucidate is one that is lived in relation to

others, in the shadows of a demand for definition. When definitions do occur they are partial, unfinished, waiting to be transformed in a conversation. This relationship to Islam involves a turning away from pietistic striving, but also a turning toward beauties and pleasures that encompass the companionship of pious kin and the poetry of pious Sufis. This turning from pietistic striving occurs in the context of a secularizing environment, but the notions of individual autonomy and private belief that are the cornerstones of that process find very little traction in the ongoing relations among intimates in Kurdistan. Rather, those relations are animated by forces such as agonistic struggle, as when Pexshan's brother calls her a *kafir* (infidel) or Niyaz's daughter issues a sharp remind for his offense; quiet patience, as when Pexshan's mother calmly acknowledged that Pexshan simply would not fast; and gestures of affection, as when Serdar calls his brother in tears at the beauty of the recited Qur'an and Niyaz exclaims that he would kiss the hands of a great Sufi figure.

In finding those forces animated by poetry, Kurdish Muslims today develop ways of relating to others that also once characterized the struggle of Mawlana Khalid to sustain relations with his companions under threats of separation. A close reading of his texts showed that it was precisely in the texture of language that one could show one's desire for companionship and inspire one's companions to renewed moral striving. Ultimately, it was also the texture of language where one could behold the beauty of God, finding and showing the moral excellence of *ihsan*. Mawlana Khalid asked his pious correspondents to busy themselves with their own devotions rather than be distracted by the prattling of detractors. But there was a

fine line between brevity and paucity. So when a companion became terse in his letters it could only be due to arrogance and the language of companionship was lost. If Mawlana Khalid's efforts to sustain relations in the face of difference within the Muslim community reached their limit at the refusal of pious striving, many contemporary Kurdish Muslims outstretch those limits by learning to live with those whose relation to Islam is more paradoxical.

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Curriculum Vita

Joseph Andrew Bush was born in Columbia, South Carolina, USA, in 1981. He graduated Ben Lippen High School in 1999 then attended James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia where he completed a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology, with honors, *summa cum laude* in December, 2002. After a first trip to Kurdistan in 2004, he began the Ph.D. program in anthropology at The Johns Hopkins University. The National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research supported dissertation fieldwork in Kurdistan. While writing his dissertation, Andrew designed and taught five undergraduate seminars at Johns Hopkins and presented at numerous academic conferences.